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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 20

Issue 3 September - Special Issue: Focus on
Family Issues

Article 10

September 1993

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Recommended Citation

Peck, Dennis L. (1993) "The Fifty Percent Divorce Rate: Deconstructing a Myth," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol20/iss3/10>

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The Fifty Percent Divorce Rate: Deconstructing a Myth

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An overview of competing perceptions about divorce in the United States establishes the basis for a discussion of the incidence of divorce, divorce rates, and the public myth of a 50 percent divorce rate. A partial explanation for the acceptance of this myth is offered through a discussion of the salience of attitude as well as other public issues.

Introduction

We are informed by some learned individuals that the divorce rate in the United States is fifty percent (e.g. Zastrow 1988). The news media further informs us that for every two marriages, one will end in divorce. The data reported regularly on marriages and divorces in local newspapers tend to support this latter contention for it does appear that one divorce is recorded for approximately every two marriages.

That the myth of an approximate 50 percent divorce rate is perpetuated by both professionals and lay persons should be a matter of concern for the facts simply do not support the claim that the American family is "falling apart", as evidenced by a "fifty percent divorce rate." That this myth is repeated by members of the clergy and young impressionable students is one thing; that the myth is perpetuated within college and university classrooms is another matter.

In the following section the myth of a fifty percent divorce rate is addressed using data reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief discussion of the phenomenon of divorce and to distinguish between a large number of divorces recorded yearly and the divorce rate.

The Normal and The Pathological

In the *Rules of the Sociological Method* (1938) Durkheim is informative in establishing the importance of social facts. Social facts, according to Durkheim (pp. 1–14), are things or data which should be used by the sociologist to explain social change. Durkheim was especially interested in using rates to monitor the fluctuation of social phenomena as he aptly demonstrated in numerous studies of social change. When the rates change, either downward or upward, Durkheim advised (1938, p. 13) it is important for sociologists to search for the structural reasons for why this change is occurring. An increase in the rate of crime, for example, could mean that the passage of a new law is responsible for the increase or perhaps a current law, which had not been used for a period of time, is now being invoked. Similar reasoning can be used to explain a decrease in the crime rate, according to Durkheim.

Demographers advise that yearly fluctuations in rates do not establish that change is occurring in society. Indeed, a more conservative approach to evaluating the social change process would require using data over a consecutive five year period. Durkheim (1938, pp. 55–56) was aware of the significance of cautious evaluation of social phenomena, stating:

We shall call 'normal' these social conditions that are the most generally distributed, and the others 'morbid' or 'pathological.' If we designate as 'average type' that hypothetical being that is constructed by assembling in the same individual, the most frequent forms, one may say that the normal type merges with the average type, and that every deviation from this standard of health is a morbid phenomenon.

Recording of social facts and the subsequent conversion of the incidence of an event into rates represents the basis for misunderstanding the U.S. divorce rate. The divorce rate is not increasing, it is not 50 percent, and it did fluctuate somewhat during the past 15 years. Rather, as the incidence and rate data reported in Table 1 show, since 1981 the divorce rate has decreased. Some modest upward fluctuation is found for 1982 and 1984, but for the remaining years since 1981 the rate of divorce has either remained stable or the rate has decreased.

Table 1

Incidence, Rate, and Ratio of Divorces and Annulments: United States, 1940–1990.

Year	Divorces and Annulments	Rate per 1,000, Total Population	Ratio per 1,000 married women 15 years and over
1990	1,161,000	4.7	—
1989	1,159,000	4.8	—
1988	1,167,000	4.7	20.7
1987	1,166,000	4.8	20.8
1986	1,178,000	4.9	21.2
1985	1,190,000	5.0	21.7
1984	1,169,000	5.0	21.5
1983	1,158,000	4.9	21.3
1982	1,170,000	5.0	21.7
1981	1,213,000	5.3	22.6
1980	1,189,000	5.2	22.6
1979	1,181,000	5.3	22.8
1978	1,130,000	5.1	21.9
1977	1,091,000	5.0	21.1
1976	1,083,000	5.0	21.1
1975	1,036,000	4.8	20.3
1974	977,000	4.6	19.3
1973	915,000	4.3	18.2
1972	845,000	4.0	17.0
1971	773,000	3.7	15.8
1970	708,000	3.5	14.9
1969	639,000	3.2	13.4
1968	584,000	2.9	12.5
1967	523,000	2.6	11.2
1966	499,000	2.5	10.9
1965	479,000	2.5	10.6
1964	450,000	2.4	10.0
1963	428,000	2.3	9.6
1962	413,000	2.2	9.4
1961	414,000	2.3	9.6
1960	393,000	2.2	9.2
1959	395,000	2.2	9.3
1958	368,000	2.1	8.9
1957	381,000	2.2	9.2

1956	382,000	2.3	9.4
1955	377,000	2.3	9.3
1954	379,000	2.4	9.5
1953	390,000	2.5	9.9
1952	392,000	2.5	10.1
1951	381,000	2.5	9.9
1950	385,000	2.6	10.3
1949	397,000	2.7	10.6
1948	408,000	2.8	11.2
1947	483,000	3.4	13.6
1946	610,000	4.3	17.9
1945	485,000	3.5	14.4
1944	400,000	2.9	12.0
1943	359,000	2.6	11.0
1942	321,000	2.4	10.1
1941	293,000	2.2	9.4
1940	264,000	2.0	8.8

Source: The data for 1989 and 1990 are from the *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* Vol. 39, No. 9 and Vol. 40, No. 2, January 3 and June 12, 1991. The data for the years 1940–1988 are from the *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* Vol. 39, No. 12, May 21, 1991.

The data trends shown in Table I are informative, using Durkheim's insights. The rate of divorce is considerably higher today (4.7 in 1988) than it was in 1940 (2.0 per 1,000), and a steadily increasing rate is recorded throughout the past three decades. But the divorce data clearly show a stable or declining rate during the 1980s. Of course, statements such as the following offered by Zastrow (1988, p. 352), tend to confuse the issue:

Now, one out of two marriages ends in divorce.
 This high rate has gradually been increasing.
 Prior to World War I, divorce seldom occurred.

The source upon which the above quotation is developed, according to Zastrow, is the "NBC News White paper: Divorce is changing America" Program shown on June 3, 1986.

Many analysts report divorce data correctly. For example, Montero and McDowell (1986, p. 142) state: "In the decade from 1966 to 1976 alone, our rate of divorce doubled, from 2.5 to 5.0

per 1,000." This is a correct statement. An equally reasonable and correct way to deal with the data recorded for divorce and marriage is cited in an introductory family text authored by Dickinson and Leming (1990, p. 330), who state

In 1988 there were approximately 2.4 million marriages and 1.2 million divorces—Americans were almost twice as likely to marry as to divorce in this year. Does this mean that one-half of all marriage end in divorce? While many have assumed that these figures indicate that 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce, we know that most of the divorces in 1988 involved marriages contracted in prior years. Consequently, based upon this information, it is not accurate to say that 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce.

As Eshleman (1985, pp. 579–580) notes, numerical comparisons of marriages and divorces for any given year can be confusing. But Eshleman also points out,:

"40 percent of all marriages occurring in a given year are remarriages of one or both spouses. Persons who divorce and remarry in the same year contribute to both the number of marriages and the number of divorces." (Dickinson and Leming 1990, p. 330).

These statements evaluate the issues appropriately, suggesting also that use of the appropriate figure in the denominator of the rate and ratio formulæ is essential to our basic understanding of an important social issue for which academics assume the responsibility for teaching students. In the following section the appropriate methods are discussed.

Divorce Rates and Ratios

As shown in Table 1, it is appropriate to speak of the general upward trend in the divorce rate for the past 25 years, but the pattern of divorce since 1976 has been relatively constant, ranging between 5.0 and 4.7. To argue that the divorce rate is increasing, when in fact the divorce rate has actually declined since 1985 (see Table 1), is an obvious misrepresentation of the facts. The myth of an increasing U.S. divorce problem may be attributed in part to the large number of divorces (incidence) recorded. According to Blalock (1972, p. 37),

Bases involving large numbers such as 1,000 or 100,000 are often used in computing rates, another type of ratio, whenever the use of proportions or percentages might result in small decimal values. Birth rates, for example, are usually given in terms of the number of live births per 1,000 females of childbearing age. Murder rates may be given in terms of the numbers of murders per 100,000 population.

Similarly, divorce rates involve large numbers. For this reason it is important to keep the facts surrounding the U.S. divorce rate in proper perspective by using correct figures. For example, the divorce rate is equal to the number of divorces occurring in a population during a specific year divided by the number of marriages in the population. This ratio is then multiplied by 1,000, 10,000 or 100,000 to eliminate decimals. Thus, the divorce rate equals

$$\frac{D}{P} \times K$$

in which D = divorces, P = the population at risk, and $K = 1,000$. The rate is crude because, as Saunders (1988, p. 41) notes, the entire population of marriages of all ages is in the denominator and divorces of all ages are included in the numerator. But the divorce rate is refined when the rate represents

... the number of divorces per 1,000 women over age 15. This measure compares the number of divorces with the total number of women eligible for divorce (adult married women) and hence is a more valid indicator of the propensity for divorce. . . . Age specific divorce rates (number of divorces per 1,000 married women in each age group) are available, but they do not provide an overall rate (Lamanna and Riedmann 1991, p. 546).

Information pertaining to divorce may again be misrepresented when the data, such as Lamanna and Riedmann (1991 pp. 544–545) report as refined divorce rates, are in fact divorce ratios. As Nock and Kingston (1990, p. 245) show, the divorce ratio divides the number of divorced persons by the number of married people per 1,000. Thus, in a population of 500 people, in which 20 divorced people live, the divorce ratio would be:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Divorce Ratio} &= \frac{20 \text{ (divorced people)}}{480 \text{ married people}} \\ &= .0416666 \times 1,000 \\ \text{Divorce Ratio} &= 41.6666 \text{ per } 1,000\end{aligned}$$

The rate of divorce, based on the 10 divorces in this same population, would be:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Divorce Rate} &= \frac{10}{500} \times 1,000 \\ &= .02 \times 1,000 \\ \text{Divorce Rate} &= 20\end{aligned}$$

The distinction between the divorce ratio and the divorce rate is significant. But this misunderstanding is exacerbated when analysts such as Lamanna and Riedman (1991, p. 543) report divorce rates for the years 1980–1987 to be in excess of 20 per thousand while neglecting to point out that these reported rates, drawn from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data, actually are age-specific divorce ratios documented for married women 15 years and over. The actual U.S. divorce rate, using the total population at risk in the denominator of the equation, ranges between 4.7 and 5.3 per 1,000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Monthly Vital Statistics Report” 39, 12 supplement 2, p. 7). The data in Table 1, shows the rates and the ratios in separate, side by side columns.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that the validity of public views of the U.S. divorce problem is questionable. In general, the data reported support the conclusion that the U.S. divorce rate is considerably lower than the 50 percent reported in some introductory textbooks as well as by the news media and other credible authorities. The divorce rate has been relatively stable since 1975, and the rate actually has declined during the past five years.

The overreporting of the U.S. divorce rate begs the question regarding why so many individuals believe the rate is 50

percent. One possible explanation for this belief may lie in the salience of attitude toward divorce since the passage of what has become known as the no fault divorce act. Divorce is more common during the past 25 years and this fact has important public policy implications. First, divorce is considered problematic when it affects children when diminished resources affect the quality of family life. Increasing numbers of people are effected in numerous ways by the pattern of divorce recorded during the past two and a half decades. Thus, as a social issue, divorce is salient as is the salience, of attitude toward divorce. Students and others are particularly sensitive to sensational kinds of information. Divorce data are of this nature, especially when one knows of or is directly affected in some way by divorce.

Second, as noted by Sears, Peplau, Freedman and Taylor (1988, pp. 134135), the social milieu affects salience. For example, a decade of conservative thinking affects social values, making previous liberal attitudes less acceptable. The divorce rate is decreasing, perhaps because, as Jackson (1991, p. Ell) suggests, the economic conditions of the late 1980s and early 1990s are causing people to avoid divorce. Some of the reasons cited by Jackson, such as for the sake of the children, the cost of making two house payments, and to keep intact an estate, are similar to those reported by Cuber and Hanoff (1966) in their study of the attitudes of upper middle-class Americans toward maintaining an unhappy marriage. Such external constraints are, as noted by Sears et al. (1988, p. 136), likely to be salient factors or stimuli which highlight divorce as an important social issue.

Another issue which may be of significance to the salience factor is the current desire to bond to one person. Many other salient stimuli provide potential causal explanations for why divorce itself is salient. Among these are the strong public attitude toward avoiding AIDS and the experience of growing up in a single parent home which, according to Dickinson and Leming (1990), cause people to view marriage differently now than in the recent past.

Finally, the myth of a high U.S. divorce rate may correlate highly in the minds of many individuals to develop what Sears et al. (1988, p. 98) call the "illusory correlation." That is, two factors, such as the "high divorce rate" and the "breakup of the

family as a viable institution" argued by religious zealots and others, are viewed as belonging together because they seem to share some common feature. Reported exposure to such illusory correlation stimuli may eventually assume the nature of a social fact. Again, the role of the news media in setting the public agenda, as well as influencing the public's perception of the "divorce problem," projects an inappropriate image of social reality.

I began this discussion by arguing that the public view of divorce is based on the myth that for every two marriages one will end in divorce. The stereotype of the U.S. divorce rate is that it is high, while this stereotype receives an inappropriate, reinforcement stimuli by the news media, clerics, and even portions of the academic community. But the data do not support this public perception in that the salience of attitude does not correspond well with the actual reality. The doubling of the divorce rate took place between 1940 and 1972. The increase and subsequent decline in the U.S. divorce rate represents a trend of modest fluctuation suggesting, in turn, the normalcy of the contemporary divorce pattern. Resistance to this fact, as opposed to a common belief in the myth of a 50 percent divorce rate, may well occur because of other salient public issues and social problems.

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Sociological Society, New Orleans, LA. The assistance of Sandra Arnold and Kimberly A. Folsie is acknowledged with appreciation.