

The Breakdown of the Family

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The Gladstone Club
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The number one pathway to poverty is family breakdown¹ and the resulting single parent families are inevitably under-resourced – trying to get by with one pair of hands instead of two. Most need support. 71% are on housing benefit compared with 25% of couples². Of course it is right to provide support but at £46bn per year it is not an insignificant cost. More than the £39bn 2012/13 defence budget. It also costs the child. Those growing up without two parents are 75% more likely to fail at school, 70% more likely to be drug addicted, 40% more likely to get into bad debt and 35% more likely to be unemployed. Nearly half 45% of British children see their parents separate before their 16th birthday.

Harry Benson concludes from all this that it would be a good thing if more couples could stay together and in 2002 founded the Bristol Community Family Trust. The trust's 'Let's Stick Together' program now reaches 30% of new mothers in Bristol making it the most successful relationship project in the country he says. He is now also Director of the Marriage Foundation where he is dedicated to researching the causes of family breakdown and has published a number of scholarly papers.

Divorce in the UK

In his paper on divorce he found “*no evidence to link either economic growth or stock market performance with change in divorce rates. During the 1991 recession divorce rates rose slightly for almost all durations of marriage whereas during the 2008 recession divorce rates fell slightly.*”³ Celebrities are twice as likely to divorce but otherwise those less educated or on lower incomes are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce if they do⁴.

Divorce was introduced here in 1857 opposed by Gladstone who perhaps foresaw its 150-year bonanza growth. Originally it was available only on grounds of adultery and that had to be proven. A 1937 act added cruelty, desertion and incurable insanity but in 1969, with the blessing of the Established Church, a no fault no proof option was added simply on grounds of separation for 5 years (or 2 if both agreed). A bar on divorce in the first 3 years was lifted in 1984. Each relaxation has triggered a spike but after the 1969 Act came an unprecedented leap. Divorce had been rising through the 60s but it doubled from 69 to 74 and tripled by 1984. Curiously, men topped out in 74 and the huge rise

was in divorces petitioned by women. Women instigate 2/3rds of divorces and some argue that is because it is higher risk for men. The mothers usually get the children and the house and often earning less than their husbands, were entitled to legal aid while he paid his own costs. The reason for the divorce, even adultery, has no impact on the outcome. On the other hand, poverty figures suggest women tend to see a 70% fall in income post divorce which hardly looks like an incentive.

Perhaps the least known fact on divorce in the UK is that the 150yr rise topped out in 1993 and has fallen by 1/3rd since - a change again entirely accounted by a drop in petitions by women. It is not clear why. However there is evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey that a younger cohort have attitudes less like their baby-boomer parents and more akin the wartime austerity of the grandparents⁵. Maybe they have seen what divorce is like and want something different.

All that said on divorce, marriage is still a good bet. Unmarried couples describing themselves as “cohabiting” or “closely involved” are three times as likely to split as married couples. 47% of children are born to unmarried parents but apart from marriages only 4% of couples survive to the child's 15th birthday. The phrase 'stable long-term relationship' has become so ubiquitous including in policy that it must soon be due its own acronym! Yet clearly those that are in one tend to marry. Aside from marriage SLTR is largely a myth.

Sliding versus deciding⁶

Harry Benson provides a compelling description of how relationships begin with two individuals coming to identify themselves as 'a couple'. Then around that outside influences grow, family and friends also seeing them as 'a couple'. That is inevitable but its effect depends on what is happening inside the couple unit. If there is a high level of dedication then the outside influences provide affirmation. If not they will start to feel like a trap.

Using longitudinal surveys that followed couples over a period of time, Harry finds that couples with children are just as likely to separate as those without. A better indicator for durability is 'decision'. Couples who decide something such as buying a house together or even just putting the phone bill in joint names were more likely to last. Just 'moving in' or 'sliding' into commitment is highly risky.

The strongest indicator by far was whether the man had made a decision. Hence the durability of marriage. Even within marriage those who moved in before marrying were less likely to last. Unlike phone bills, having children can be done by sliding. Often the parties hope the child will supply what the relationship lacks. But where decision is weak the child becomes part of the sense of trap. Most separations occur before he is 3yrs.

Single parent families

Of the 24% of children in single parent families most come from failed marriages and cohabitations, a few widowed and only 7% of births are registered with no father named. Many are unplanned of course, 15% are terminated. Nearly half of under-18 pregnancies end in abortion. But an unknown number are planned. First hand anecdotes of teenage girls planning pregnancy as an exit from the family to a council flat are too frequent to be ignored. In short it is difficult to get a sense of the extent to which welfare policy creates single parenthood but it is a significant factor. America provides less support for single parents and has more of them (27% of children in single parent families) but they are much less eager to terminate teenage pregnancies: 29% to our 49%.

In his paper 'Parents that pretend to live apart' Harry criticises the 'couple penalty' in the tax credit system that perversely rewards couples if they are not married and pretend to live apart. A couple with their first child may be as much as £7100 better off. Comparing ONS statistics from the Labour Force Survey and tax credit data from HMRC Benson finds there are at least 240,000 fewer lone parent families than claim tax credits as lone parents.

Benson does not believe couples separate on economic grounds. And he has not studied if economic stress within relationships – such as taxation policy forcing mothers into the workplace – may contribute to breakdown of families. But it is clear that some lone parent family formation is fostered by policy, and some commitment dissuaded by it. So there are some policy implications. Beyond that, he says, we should advise our daughters to hesitate before moving in. And above all avoid getting attached to indecisive males.

¹Centre for Social Justice 'Breakthrough Britain' 2007

²ONS Vital Statistics Output 2011

³Its not about the economy' Harry Benson 2013

⁴Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000; Kiernan, 2003 cited by Benson

⁵www.cps.org.uk/blog/q/date/2013/09/13

⁶Sliding versus Deciding' Stanley et al 2006