



IFFD PAPERS no. 8

PRODUCED BY



THE FAMILY WATCH
www.thefamilywatch.org

Does divorce always bring a 'better life'? How could most breakups (and its effects) be avoided

1st April 2012

Introduction

A famous Spanish newsreader made a significant comment on the radio recently – “If I had known the consequences of divorce for me and my children before getting into it, I wouldn’t have been in such a hurry and I wouldn’t have assumed that there was no other solution.” The purpose of this paper is to show that this is not an exception and to explore some ways to avoid breakups and their consequences whenever it is possible.

We know by now that the decrease in marriage rates and the parallel increase in divorce rates in the First World have not only paid a negative contribution to Demography –because they have a significant influence in the birth rate–, but also very negative effects on children and an unaffordable public cost. Europe is a good example of it.

Crude marriage/divorce rates
EU-27 1970-2010 ¹



¹ Eurostat (data October 2011). Available at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Marriage_and_divorce_statistics. The crude marriage/divorce rate is the number of marriages/divorces occurring among the population of a given geographical area during a given year, per 1,000 mid-year total population of the given geographical area during the same year.

The myth of “giving up the present and starting again”

“The increase in divorce rates is one of the most visible changes in Western family life. It is seen —together with increases in cohabitation and unwed parenthood, and declines in marriage and fertility— as part of a broader change, the ‘second demographic transition.’ These changes have brought about various concerns, some of which focusing on their economic implications, others on the effects on child development, and still others that see them as moral problems related to a breakdown of the family institution.”²

It is obvious that no one would get married if they knew that they will end in divorce, but the fact is that many couples and their children are getting the worst part when they don’t succeed in their marriage. “We know now that there is an unequivocal association between couple relationship breakdown and adult ill-health, as well as poor child outcomes.”³ In many cases, breakup is not the end of the problems but the beginning of a series of new ones which affect more people and in more depth. The optimistic and naïve view that if parents divorce they will each soon marry someone else who will make them happy and bring stability is not typically borne out. A Spanish Family Judge usually shares how he feel surprised every time a couple asks for a divorce because they want “to give up the present and start again”, as if there were no children, common properties and other sources of mutual obligations that can be much better dealt with in marriage, except if there is a real need to end up a major conflict.⁴

“Paradoxically, divorce following low pre-divorce conflict, compared to high pre-divorce conflict, has been shown to be more detrimental to the health and well-being of children. This is because low levels of conflict often mean children have little time to anticipate the relationship breakdown, and may result in some children blaming themselves for the separation.”⁵

The new study by the Institute for American Values shows the real dimension for it. “There is a popular assumption among professionals and the public that divorce happens only after a long process of misery and conflict finally drives the spouses to end the marriage,” but it is not true. “Longitudinal research over the past decade has shown that the majority of divorces (from 50 to 66 percent, depending on the study) occur in couples who had average happiness and low levels of conflict in the years prior to the divorce. These couples generally look quite similar to continuously married couples, but they have risk factors such as having grown up in a divorced family, lower levels of commitment to marriage, and less knowledge of the effects of divorce on children. The other group (from 33 to 50 percent of divorcing couples) shows a pattern of high conflict, alienation, and sometimes abuse.”⁶

And what are the consequences for children? “As for the effects of the divorce on children, the research consensus is that children who live with chronic high levels of conflict and hostility between their parents will likely benefit from a divorce. But children in the average marriages that break up —those that constitute the majority of divorces— are likely to be harmed by the divorce. They do not understand why their parents broke up. They may blame themselves. And they are propelled from a relatively stable family life into a post-divorce world that offers little relief and brings many challenges.”⁷

Garriga and Härkönen have reached the same conclusions, as Amato did in 2000⁸: “parental divorce has the potential to create a major turmoil in children’s lives, a turmoil that can have long-term consequences. This may need not be the case, however, as not all children suffer from divorce and divorce may even be beneficial for children from highly conflicting and abusive families. Nevertheless, parental divorce appears, on average, to have more negative than positive consequences on children’s lives.” As they also point out, the objection of all these causes being the result of the previous conflict rather of the divorce itself seem to be denied by evidence.⁹

And the new situation doesn’t necessarily mean that new problems won’t arise. “An important recent trend in research has been to investigate not only the effects of divorce on children, but also the effects of multiple family transitions that often follow after divorce. [...] Children whose parents divorce often go through not just one family transi-

² Anna Garriga and Juho Härkönen, ‘The Effects of Marital Instability on Children’s Well-being and Intergenerational Relations’ (EqualSOC, 2009). Available at: <http://www.thefamilywatch.org/doc/doc-0252-es.pdf>.

³ ‘When couples part: Understanding the consequences for adults and children’, One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research (2009). Available at: <http://www.thefamilywatch.org/doc/doc-0063-es.pdf>.

⁴ Cfr. Francisco Ruiz-Jarabo, ‘Hasta que la muerte nos separe’. Available at: <http://juezafamilia.blogspot.com/>.

⁵ ‘When couples part: Understanding the consequences...’. See also Booth, A. & Amato, P., ‘Parental Pre-divorce Relations and Offspring Post-Divorce Well Being’, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63 (2001); Jekielek, S., ‘Parental Conflict, Marital Disruption and Children’s Emotional Well-Being’, *Social Forces* 76 (1998); Amato, P., Loomis, L. and Booth, A., ‘Parental Divorce, Marital Conflict and Offspring Well-Being During Early Adulthood’, *Social Forces* 73 (1995).

⁶ ‘Second Chances - A Proposal to Reduce Unnecessary Divorce’ (Institute for American Values, 2011).

⁷ ‘Second Chances - A Proposal to ...’. See also Paul R. Amato and Bryndl Holmann-Marriott, ‘A Comparison of High- and Low-Distress Marriages that End in Divorce’, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (2007); Alan Booth and Paul R. Amato, ‘Parental Predivorce Relations and Offspring Postdivorce Well-Being’, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63 (2001); Susan M. Jekielek, ‘Parental Conflict, Marital Disruption and Children’s Emotional Well-Being’, *Social Forces* 76 (1998).

⁸ Amato, P. R., ‘The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children’, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62 (2000).

⁹ Anna Garriga and Juho Härkönen, ‘The Effects of Marital ...’.

tion, but several or many (especially given that after a divorce a child's mother and father are each following separate relationship paths). These studies are showing that the more transitions children go through, the more behavior problems and delinquent behavior they have, the lower their academic achievement and psychological well-being, and the greater their risk for having a non-marital birth and relationship instability in adulthood."¹⁰

Finally, there is another wrong assumption that should be mentioned, and that is considering the economic level is a remedy to counteract divorce. The truth is that it doesn't always prevent those effects for children. "When control variables are included in the model, family income (after divorce at age 10 of child) is not the most important predictor of educational level for children from divorced families, and it is also not a significant mediating factor of the effect of parental divorce on children's educational level."¹¹

Public costs of private decisions

Divorce has many social consequences and, first of all, public costs. "Marriage is an economic institution as well as a social one; it generates social and human capital, especially with regard to children. Research on family structure is now suggesting a variety of ways through which lasting marriages may reduce the need for costly social programs. In a recent national [American] study that included extensive data on all fifty states and relied on extremely cautious economic modeling, scholars estimated that divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing costs U.S. taxpayers at least \$112 billion every year."¹²

Some other studies corroborate that, from an economic perspective, a stable family is the lowest cost option for both its members and the State. "Choices have consequences and costs, and that these are not always borne by the choice-maker. Breakdown reduces health, wealth and wellbeing – the three things people are most interested in. And reduced health, wealth and wellbeing all put pressure on relationships making the cycle of breakdown more likely to go on turning."¹³ These figures take the consequences of family breakups into account as well as the strain it puts on social benefits, social security, social services etc. Furthermore, these studies also suggest that members of stable families are more disciplined when it comes to fulfilling legal and social norms and, therefore, are the ones who best contribute towards financing social security.¹⁴

In Canada, for instance, the Institute of Marriage and Family has studied 'How failing families cost us all', and they made some interesting remarks from it. "The results show the cost of serving broken families is almost \$7 billion annually. [...] Included in this calculation are means-tested provincial programs geared toward alleviating poverty; programs that fall under housing, child care and welfare. We estimate the savings that could be realized if family breakdown were to decrease by half by calculating the subsequent decrease in government transfers. We have chosen to be conservative in our estimate by excluding associated justice and education costs, which include, for example, the existence of family courts and agencies that enforce child support payments. This report also highlights the extent to which family breakdown has contributed to the feminization of poverty and the fact that family structure matters in the long term fight against poverty, in particular child poverty. If we are serious about reducing poverty, valuable short term solutions, like food banks and shelters, must partner with long term solutions, which include examining family structure and eradicating family breakdown."¹⁵

The prestigious Centre for Social Justice has analyzed "the major challenge of family breakdown in the UK today. It has become a fundamental and entrenched cultural experience directly affecting an estimated third of the UK population and indirectly affecting countless more across all ages and social backgrounds. Moreover this is not a purely private issue, affecting only the couple themselves. Children are often profoundly affected by parental separation, often carrying the scars into their adult lives and personal relationships. Nowadays we see many couples entering marriage with high expectations but much lower capacities to realise those expectations and little understanding of the long-term nature of the commitment." And the conclusion is as straight and categorical: "the cost to our nation of relationship breakdown has been estimated at £20-£24 billion, between £680 and £820 for every taxpayer.¹⁶ The cost to the nation of supporting a single-parent family is between £4,000 and £15,000 per annum. Other research puts the

¹⁰ 'Second Chances - A Proposal to ...'.

¹¹ Anna Garriga, 'How Does Parental Divorce Affect Children's Educational Level?', European Population Conference (2010). Available at: <http://epc2010.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=100914>.

¹² 'Second Chances - A Proposal to ...'.

¹³ 'When Relationships Go Wrong: Counting the cost of family failure', Relationships Foundation (2009). Available at: <http://www.thefamilywatch.org/doc/doc-0056-es.pdf>.

¹⁴ Cfr. The Family Watch, 'The Sustainable Family' (2009). Available at: <http://www.thefamilywatch.org/Report2009.pdf>.

¹⁵ Rebecca Walberg and Andrea Mrozek, 'Private choices, public costs - How failing families cost us all', Institute of Marriage and Family (2009). Available at: <http://www.thefamilywatch.org/doc/doc-0042-es.pdf>.

¹⁶ This figure was a conservative estimate made by the 'Social Justice Policy Group'. For more details see 'Social Justice Policy Group', 'Fractured Families', Volume 2 of 'Breakdown Britain', Centre for Social Justice (2006).

¹³ 'When Relationships Go Wrong: Counting...'

cost of family breakdown at a staggering £37 billion. The culture of relationship breakdown must change for economic as well as social reasons. Our nation simply cannot continue to afford the cost.”¹⁷

What can be done to prevent ‘avoidable divorce’

The report by the Institute for American Values I have already quoted reveals that “new research shows that about 40 percent of U.S. couples already well into the divorce process say that one or both of them are interested in the possibility of reconciliation. This finding is stunning. It tells us that we have a major new opportunity to help millions of American families and to strengthen our society.”¹⁸

As a consequence, the report suggests “a waiting period of at least one year from the date of filing for divorce before the divorce becomes final”. Why do we recommend a minimum of one year? While some states with low divorce rates have a two-year waiting period—and we believe that there are solid reasons why they should retain this time limit—we believe that as a general and threshold rule (a minimum of) one year is sufficient to accomplish the goals recommended in this report. Some might suggest that any nontrivial mandatory waiting period is unnecessary and unfair. Why not let people decide for themselves whether they want to divorce quickly or to be more deliberate? [...] People in ‘hot states’ of emotion are prone to make costly decisions based on systematic errors, particularly in the areas of life with which they do not have a lot of experience, such as deciding to divorce.”¹⁹

Personally, I think that having some time to ‘think carefully’ and allow feelings to be considered more rationally is always a sensible decision, and that we all need help for it, but it should be more than a waiting period, because time is not a remedy in itself. It can also be an occasion to make resentment grow. Therefore, it should be an ‘active waiting’ period and the chance to get counseling, therapy and mediation should be provided whenever it is needed. And it is needed in all those cases where conflict is not as old in time and as relevant in importance to justify breakup by itself. Of course, no one advocates for keeping destructive marriages together, and physical separation will be a necessary safety valve in some cases. But if about 40% of couples already deeply into the divorce process report that one or both spouses are interested in the possibility of reconciliation, if a reasonable reduction in divorce would benefit millions of children each year in the world and significant savings for taxpayers, it is worth to make it a priority in all our countries.

Such a project will imply different policies to make it possible. That is why The Family Watch have organized recently a seminar on prevention of family conflict. The conclusions will be published in short and will hopefully give some more hints on how to implement it.²⁰

María José Olesti.

© The Family Watch 2012

This paper does not represent the official position either of the International Federation for Family Development, The Family Watch or any other institution, but only the views of its author. It is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License.

¹⁷ Family Law Review, ‘Every Family Matters - An in-depth review of family law in Britain’, The Centre for Social Justice (2009). Available at: <http://www.thefamilywatch.org/doc/doc-0050-es.pdf>.

¹⁸ ‘Second Chances - A Proposal to ...’.

¹⁹ ‘Second Chances - A Proposal to ...’.

²⁰ Those conclusions will be available at: <http://www.thefamilywatch.org>.