Module 2 Institutions

Lecture 12
Family, Marriage and Kinship – Part III

Current Trends in the Family and Marriage

Today’s world which is aptly termed as a global village is witness to various transitions and problems in the structure of family and marriage as significant social institutions. In this lecture, we are going to discuss very important themes in the current trends in the family and marriage. The themes include:

- Divorce
- Remarriage
- Family violence

And then we shall discuss different alternative family forms, viz. (a) single-parent families, (b) cohabitation, (c) lesbian and gay couples, and (d) singlehood.

Divorce


(a) **Individualism is on the rise.** Today’s members of the family spend less time together. People have become more individualistic and more concerned about personal happiness and earning income than about the well-being of families and children.

(b) **Romantic love often subsides.** Because our culture bases marriage on romantic love, relationships may fail when sexual passion fades. Many people end marriage in favour of a new relationship that renews excitement and romance.

(c) **Women are now less dependent on men.** Increasing participation in the labour force has reduced wives’ financial dependency on husbands. Therefore, it is wiser to leave unhappy marriages.

(d) **Many of today’s marriages are stressful.** With both partners working outside the home in most cases, jobs leave less time and energy for family life. Thus, raising children becomes much harder. Children do stabilize some marriages, but divorce is most common during the early years of marriage, when many couples have young children.

(e) **Divorce is socially and legally acceptable.** Divorce no longer carries the powerful stigma it did a century ago. Family and friends are now less likely to discourage couples in conflict from divorcing.

Remarriage

Remarriage often creates *blended families*, composed of children and some combination of biological parents and stepparents. With sisters, brothers, half sisters, a stepdad – not to mention a biological parent who lives elsewhere and may now be married to someone else with other children – young people in blended families face the challenge of defining many
new relationships and deciding just who is part of the nuclear family. Parents often have trouble defining responsibility for household work among people unsure of their relations to each other. Then, too, when the custody of children is an issue, ex-spouses can be a source of interference for people in a new marriage. In all these cases, adjustments are necessary, and family dynamics typically change over time. At the same time, blended families offer both young and old the chance to relax rigid family roles (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991, 2001; McLahahan 2002).

**Family Violence**

The ideal family is a source of pleasure and support. However, the disturbing reality of many homes is family violence, emotional, physical or sexual abuse of one member of the family by another. Richard J. Gelles calls the family “the most violent group in society with the exception of the police and the military” (quoted in Roesch 1984: 75). Family violence occurs in the context of violence against women and violence against children.

**Alternative Family Forms**

Most families across the continents are still composed of a married couple who, at some point, raise children. However, recently our society has displayed greater diversity in family life.

(a) **Single-parent Families**: Single-parent families result from divorce, death or an unmarried woman’s decision to have a child. Single parenthood increases a woman’s risk of poverty because it limits her ability to work and to further her education. The converse is also true: poverty raises the odds that a young woman will become a single mother (Trent 1994). In many single-parent families, mothers turn to their own mothers for support. The rise in single parenting is tied to a declining role for fathers and the growing importance of grandparenting. Research shows that growing up in a single-parent family usually disadvantages children.

(b) **Cohabitation**: Cohabitation is the sharing of a household by an unmarried couple. In global perspective, cohabitation is a long-term form of family life, with or without children, is common in Sweden and other Scandinavian nations. Cohabitation is gaining in popularity in the other continents as well. Cohabitation tends to appeal to more independent-minded individuals as well as those who favour gender equality (Brines and Joyner 1999). Most couples cohabit for no more than a few years, about half then deciding to marry and half ending the relationship. Mounting evidence suggests that living together may actually discourage marriage because partners become used to low-commitment relationships. When cohabiting couples with children separate, the involvement of both parents, including financial support, is far from certain.

(c) **Lesbian and Gay Couples**: In 1989, Denmark became the first country to lift its legal ban on same-sex marriages. This change offered social legitimacy to lesbian and gay couples and equalized advantages in inheritance, taxation and joint property ownership. Norway (in 1993), Sweden (1995), the Netherlands (2001) and Canada (2003) have followed suit.

(d) **Singlehood**: Recently, more people are deliberately choosing to live alone. Various economic, social, cultural and political factors may be attributed to singlehood.
References


Questions

1. What are the factors leading to increased rate of divorce?

2. How is remarriage significant in rebuilding a family?

3. Identify the alternative family forms numerously existing in the present times.