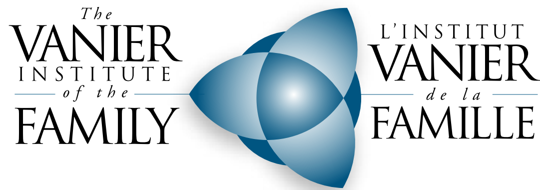

CONTEMPORARY FAMILY TRENDS

DIVORCE: Facts, Causes & Consequences

Dr. Anne-Marie Ambert

York University

(3rd Edition, 2009)

NOVEMBER 2009

About the author

Dr. Anne-Marie Ambert is now a retired professor. She had been at the Department of Sociology, York University since 1971. She has done research and published extensively in the areas of divorce and remarriage, poverty, and various aspects of the parent-child relationship. She is currently revising her latest book entitled *Changing Families: Relationships in Context*, published in 2005 by Pearson Canada, for a second edition. She has also served for over two decades on the editorial board for the Journal of Marriage and Family. More recently, her long experience with condos has led her toward applied research in order to help condo owners understand their rights and responsibilities and how condos work: www.condoinformation.ca. Professor Ambert can be reached at ambert@yorku.ca.

About the Institute

The Vanier Institute of the Family was established in 1965 under the patronage of Their Excellencies Governor General Georges P. Vanier and Madame Pauline Vanier. It is a national voluntary organization dedicated to promoting the well-being of Canada's families through research, publications, public education and advocacy. The Institute regularly works with businesses, legislators, policy-makers and program specialists, researchers, educators, family service professionals, the media and members of the general public.

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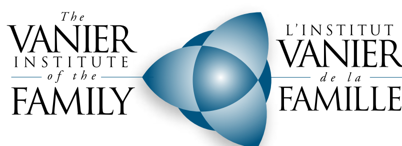

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DIVORCE: Facts, Causes & Consequences

Dr. Anne-Marie Ambert
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FOREWORD

I was struck by the findings of a recent survey of teenagers in Canada, in which 90% said they expect to marry, and to stay with the same partner for life[1]. The percentage of young people with this expectation is about the same – actually, slightly higher – than when these questions were put to an earlier generation of teenagers some 15 years ago. What is curious about this is that it seems to be quite at odds with the "evidence." By current estimates, only half of today's young men and women are likely to marry (although most will form conjugal unions), and of those who do enter into a formal or legal first marriage, about one-third will divorce before the 30th wedding anniversary.

So how are we to make sense of the "gap" between expectations and actual outcomes? Perhaps some will simply attribute it to naïve optimism among young people. But more significantly, perhaps it signals a more or less enduring aspiration, if not expectation, to live our lives within committed, lifelong relationships.

In our lifetimes, many of us will experience separation and divorce, and many will navigate the difficult terrain of a relationship in profound transition. Many more of us will experience divorce, not as separating couples, but as the children of divorcing parents, the parents of divorcing children, or simply as other close relatives, friends or co-workers. Anyone who has had such an experience will likely know that it can be accompanied by tremendous emotion, anxiety and sometimes fear. And most will acknowledge that each story of divorce is unique, deeply textured by particular circumstances and events within and surrounding the lives of the individuals involved.

To understand divorce and divorce trends is no easy task. In this, the 3rd edition of *Divorce: Facts, Causes and Consequences*, Dr. Anne-Marie Ambert of York University points out that divorce is a complex phenomenon, involving multiple interlocking factors operating within an evolving social, cultural and legal context. Drawing on the latest statistics available, Dr. Ambert first addresses the most frequently asked questions about divorce, and along the way, helps us to understand what the statistics on divorce tell us, and as important, what they do not tell us. Dr. Ambert also reviews a large research literature to help us better understand the variety of factors that have been associated with divorce trends over the past 50 years, and to reflect on the varied consequences that divorce and separation may have, in the lives of those involved, and by extension, for the societies in which they take place.

Clarence Lochhead
Executive Director
Nov. 2009

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[1] Bibby, Reginald W. (2009). The Emerging Millennials: How Canada's Newest Generation is Responding to Change and Choice. Lethbridge, Alberta: Project Canada Books, p.199.

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DIVORCE: Facts, Causes, and Consequences

This article answers some of the main and most frequently asked questions regarding divorce, including: what percentage of marriages taking place today will end in divorce? Are divorce rates going up or down? Is Canada's divorce rate higher than other countries? In providing answers to these and other questions, this article also explains the various statistics that are used to measure divorce, and discusses their limitations. The paper is divided into three sections: One presents the basic numbers, while the other two focus on the causes and consequences of divorce. Issues on remarriage and cohabitation that pertain to divorce are also reviewed.

UNDERSTANDING THE NUMBERS

Is it true that "one out of every two marriages ends in divorce"?

No for Canada as a whole but *yes* for Quebec. The latest estimates by Statistics Canada (2008) put the risk of divorce by the 30th wedding anniversary for recently married couples at 38% for the country as a whole—ranging from 21.6% in Newfoundland and Labrador to 48.4% in Quebec as illustrated in Table 1. This compares with an estimated 44% in the U.S. However, these estimates include persons who are divorcing for the first time as well as those who are divorcing for a second time or more. For instance, in 2005, 16% of divorces included husbands who had already been divorced at least once and 15% involved wives who had also been divorced before. The probability of divorcing is somewhat lower for a *first marriage* but is higher for a remarriage.

Why the misunderstanding?

People are often led to believe that one out of two marriages ends in divorce because we too frequently use the American media as a source of information and, in the 1980s, it was actually true that one out of two American marriages ended in divorce. This peak time statistic has "stuck" in the media and in our imagination.

Another reason for this misunderstanding stems from simplistic ways of measuring divorce that are too often used. For example, one method simply divides the *number* of divorces in a year on the basis of the *number of marriages* that have taken place during this same year. If the number of marriages goes down, as it has in the past decade, the *proportion* of divorces compared to marriages will automatically increase even if the *number* of divorces remains the same. As you can see, using the number of marriages as a basis is a misleading way of calculating divorce rates. For example, in 2005, Quebec had 15,423 divorces and only 22,244 marriages (Girard, 2008). With this number method, we would falsely conclude that 69% of current Quebec marriages will end in divorce when the reality is 48.4% (Table 1).

A second equally misleading approach utilizes the *rate* of divorce in one year and compares it to the *rate* of marriage in the same year, such as 2.7 divorces per 1,000 population and 5.4 marriages per 1,000 population. Thus, the divorce rate (stated as a ratio) is 50% that of marriages—a false "fact," as we have already seen. Furthermore, because this 50% rate is calculated on the basis of marriages and divorces occurring in one same year, it has at times been erroneously used to predict that "50% of people marrying in a year will end up divorced." One has to keep in mind that divorces recorded in any one year rarely happen to couples who have married during that same year!

Unfortunately, the above two methods of calculating divorce are used in many countries, even by researchers, and appear in a few textbooks in Canada and the U.S. This means that we have to be vigilant when statistics are thrown at us.

So how do we measure divorce?

When people ask about divorce rates, they are most often interested in knowing what will happen to couples who are marrying this year: *"What's their chance of staying married?"* But not all divorce statistics answer this question—only the first one below does.

The most refined way of measuring divorce is to calculate what is referred to as the **Total Divorce Rate** (see Table 1). It consists of looking at couples who marry in a given year and calculating the proportion expected to divorce before their 30th wedding anniversary. For instance, Canada's 2004 total divorce rate of 37.9 divorces per 100 marriages means that 37.9% of all marriages taking place in 2004 will have ended by 2035 if, as Statistics Canada point out, the "duration-specific divorce rates calculated for 2004 remain stable." In other words, the Total Divorce Rate is a prediction about future levels of divorce, based on the actual divorce patterns of the recent past. This method gives the closest approximation to a lifetime divorce rate because, after 30 years of marriage, relatively few divorces take place. However, this method cannot be used for comparisons across the world because it requires adequate governmental record keeping and complex calculations that relatively few countries can afford.

TABLE 1 **Total Divorce Rates, per 100 Marriages, by the 30th Wedding Anniversary by Provinces and Territories**

	1998	2000	2002	2004
Canada	36.1	37.7	37.6	37.9
Newfoundland & Labrador	23.2	22.9	21.8	21.6
Prince Edward Island	26.4	26.9	25.2	29.1
Nova Scotia	28.2	30.4	30.4	30.2
New Brunswick	26.9	31.9	27.2	26.9
Quebec	45.2	47.4	47.6	48.4
Ontario	33.0	34.6	34.9	35.5
Manitoba	30.1	34.6	30.3	30.6
Saskatchewan	31.5	31.4	28.7	27.6
Alberta	39.0	41.5	41.9	41.9
British Columbia	40.0	40.6	41.0	40.8
Yukon	55.2	33.6	43.4	34.8
Northwest Territories & Nunavut	37.5	40.7	31.2	35.5

Source: Ambert, 2005a; Statistics Canada, 2008, and earlier

Another method of measuring divorce focuses on those who are eligible to divorce, namely legally married couples, which gives us a divorce rate per 1,000 or 100,000 married couples in a population. For instance, Beaujot and Kerr (2004) show that in 2002, there were 1,050 divorces per 100,000 married couples in Canada compared to 1,302 in 1986. This is also an interesting measure, but it does not address the key question: what chance do couples marrying this year have of staying married over the course of their lifetime? It does, however, provide information on trends for married couples.

The most common method of measuring divorce is the yearly **crude** rate for every 1,000 or 100,000 persons in the population. In 2005, this rate in Canada was 2.2 per 1,000 population compared to 2.9 in 1990 and 3.6 in 1987. (Tables 2 and 3 utilize this method.)

Although this method is valid and fulfills many purposes in terms of historical and international trends, it has its drawbacks. For instance, when we calculate divorces per 100,000 population, children are included as well as single and widowed persons. All of these people reduce the divorce rate because they can't divorce! Moreover, this calculation is vulnerable to shifts in demographic composition.

But is this the entire story?

No. Several points need to be emphasized.

1. Predictions about divorce are just that: predictions. They are made on the basis of **yearly** trends. Unfortunately, the "yearly" is often forgotten in heated discussions! Thus, predictions have to be constantly revised to fit new realities.

2. As already emphasized, some of the divorces that take place each year are actually second or third divorces for some people. So while the Total Divorce Rate tells us about the percentage of *marriages* expected to end in divorce, it does not tell us about the proportion of *people* who divorce. In other words, during their lifetime, some people contribute disproportionately to the divorce rate.
3. Consequently, while some young people who marry for the first time may be worried about these predictions, it is important to keep in mind that the divorce rate for **first** marriages is somewhat *lower* than the 37.9% shown in Table 1—probably closer to 33%. In other words, *first marriages* have a 67% chance of lasting a lifetime. Furthermore, as we will see later on, some couples are at even lower risk of divorcing.
4. Also missing from the portrait painted by current divorce statistics is the element of non-marital cohabitation. Cohabitation is increasing and is now more common than marriage in Quebec as a first union and after divorce. Currently, 65% of couples living together in Quebec are married compared to 87% in the rest of Canada (Girard, 2008). But when a cohabiting union breaks up, the dissolution does not appear in divorce statistics. Therefore, divorce rates do not provide an accurate picture of **conjugal dissolution** rates (cohabitations + marriages that end).
5. An important question requiring additional research is whether and to what extent cohabitations constitute "hidden marriages," and as such, whether the dissolution of cohabitations can or should be thought of as "hidden divorces." These are important questions, not only for those trying to measure the true extent of conjugal dissolution, but also for researchers in family law, gender equity and children's rights. The answer is not necessarily a simple one. Including *all* cohabitations as a form of marriage for instance, may be misleading and so would be equating their break up with divorce (Ambert, 2005b). Indeed, many cohabitations last a few months and merely constitute temporary or day-to-day arrangements lacking any long-term or life-long commitment as is explicit in marriage. On the other hand, cohabitations with children tend to be more stable (Wu, 2000). And cohabitations in Quebec are also somewhat more stable than in the rest of Canada; particularly so when children are born to the union. These unions are more akin to marriages (Kerr et al., 2006).
6. Finally, an unknown number of couples separate but never divorce. This type of conjugal dissolution may be as significant and consequential as a divorce, yet it does not appear in divorce statistics. It may also be increasing among those who separate and go on to cohabit fairly rapidly after their separation.

So, when caveats 4 and 5 are put together, it is certainly true that at least one out of every two *unions* ends in dissolution—with lower rates in the Maritimes and Prairies and higher ones in Quebec. The percentage may become even higher if younger cohorts continue to enter into cohabitation as a first union in greater numbers.

Are divorce rates going up or down?

They have gone *down* substantially during the 1990s and have remained at a lower level since 1997—with minor yearly fluctuations. In Table 2, Statistics Canada presents us with the following crude rates of divorce throughout the years:

TABLE 2 **Crude Divorce Rates per 100,000 Population since 1921**

Year	# of divorces	Rates per 100,000 population
1921	558	6.4
1941	2,462	21.4
1961	6,563	36.0
1968*	11,343	54.8
1969	26,093	124.2
1981	67,671	271.8
1985**	61,980	253.6
1986	78,304	298.8
1987***	96,200	362.3
1990	80,998	295.8
1995	77,636	262.2
1997	67,408	224.8
2000	70,292	228.4
2002	70,155	223.0
2005	71,269	220.7

* Reform of Divorce Laws ** Divorce Act ("no fault") *** Peak year Source: Table 101-6501, Statistics Canada, 2008

Divorce greatly increased beginning in 1968 when a new Divorce Act was passed which broadened the grounds for divorce and made divorce available across Canada; in fact, Canada experienced a five-fold increase from 1968 to 1995. Divorce rates peaked in 1987 in Canada and in 1981 in the U.S. The 1987 peak in Canada reflected spouses waiting for and then using the new and even broader grounds for divorce in the 1986 Divorce Act changes. However, as we have seen in Table 1, there are large provincial variations: over the past decade, Quebec has consistently shown the highest rates while the Maritime provinces, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have shown the lowest .

Whether divorce rates will increase or decrease in any substantial way in the future depends on the complex interplay between numerous socio-economic, political, cultural and demographic factors, as well as individual preferences and values. For example, as more young couples choose to cohabit before marriage and as the "children of divorce" who are at a higher risk of divorcing enter into marriage themselves, there are chances that divorce rates could keep rising—as has been the case for Quebec in particular. Or, if the proportion of adults between 25 and 45 declines in the population, the rates of divorce will go down because this is the age range with most divorces. Or, yet, if cohabitation increases and their break up is not included in some form of statistics, then, in the long run, real divorces will diminish but

union dissolution will increase. As you can see, predictions depend on many "ifs."

To conclude, except for Quebec, divorce rates have come down substantially since the 1990s. But, at the same time, marriage rates have come down—thus reducing divorce risk--while cohabitation rates have risen, especially in Quebec. Therefore, couple dissolution in general has certainly not decreased and may actually have increased.

How do Canadian rates compare with others?

Keeping all of the above in mind, in Table 3, United Nations statistics (2006, 2008) give the following *crude* divorce rates per 1,000 for selected western countries in 2002 and 2005.

TABLE 3 **Crude Divorce Rates per 1,000 Population for Selected Countries for the Years 2002 and 2005.**

	Rates per 1,000 Population	
Countries	**2002**	**2005**
Russian Federation	5.3	4.5
U.S.	4.3	3.6
Cuba	3.1	3.2
U.K.	3.1*	2.8**
France	2.7*	2.3
Sweden	2.4	2.2
Japan	2.3	2.1
Canada	**2.2**	**2.2**
Portugal	1.8	2.3
Israel	1.7	1.7
Italy	0.7	0.8
Jamaica	0.7	0.7
Mexico	0.6	0.7

*1996; **2003. Source: United Nations, 2005, 2008

The first observation is that, with the exception of Portugal, divorce rates in Europe have increased substantially in the 1990s (not shown here), but have remained stable or decreased in the 2000s (Sardon, 2006). Although the American rate has declined, it still is the highest rate in the western world, followed by the U.K. and Cuba. Russia has even higher rates at 4.5. Thus, although our rate is modest compared to the U.S. and Russia, it is in line with those of many other OECD/western countries. (But it should also be noted that the American rate includes a larger proportion of people who have divorced many times than is the case in Canada. Thus, for Americans as well, the risk for a first marriage of ending in divorce is lower than indicated by their overall rate.)

What about same-sex divorce?

Same-sex marriage became legal only in 2004 in some provinces and in 2005 for Canada as a whole. At this time, although such divorces have occurred, statistics are understandably not available. Nevertheless, it is interesting to look at the numbers of same-sex marriages in Quebec (Girard, 2008), which totaled 245 in 2004; 451 in 2005; 621 in 2006 and 470 in 2007.

As statistics become available, it will be possible to examine the extent to which patterns and rates of divorce among gay and lesbian couples resemble those of heterosexual couples. Given that same-sex marriage has only recently become legal, it is quite possible that a good proportion of recent same-sex marriages involve couples in long-term relationships. As such, one could reasonably predict that the divorce rate would be lower than that of married couples who are heterosexual. It will take a few years before meaningful statistics appear.

How many people divorce more than once?

Statistics Canada indicates that 16% of divorcing women and men in 2005 had been divorced at least once before (Statistics Canada, 2008). These rates are lower in Newfoundland (perhaps because of emigration to other provinces and also because they have a much lower divorce rate to start with) and Quebec (because the divorced tend to cohabit rather than remarry). The highest rates of serial divorces are in B.C., Alberta, and Yukon. Therefore, over 20% of all divorces in Canada are a repeat divorce for at least one of the spouses. Both here and in the U.S., people who divorce many times seem to differ from the once-divorced on some dimensions (Ambert, 2005a:394; Booth, 1999). Some have more personal problems while others are less committed to marriage. For instance, Clark and Crompton (2006) have found that people who experience multiple divorces are much less likely to believe that marriage is important to them and to their happiness.

After how many years of marriage do couples divorce?

The average duration of marriages ending in divorce in 2005 was 14.5 years or **1.7 years longer than a decade ago** (Statistics Canada, 2008). In Ontario, it was 13.8 years compared to 16.7 years in P.E.I. Lengthier marriages before divorce are also occurring in other western countries, such as the U.K.

As well, Statistics Canada indicates that the highest number of divorces occurs after the 3rd and 4th anniversaries—or 26.1 and 25.8 respectively per 1,000 marriages. After that, the rate decreases for each additional year married and, by the 40th anniversary, only 1.19 divorces occur per 1,000 marriages.

How old are people at divorce?

In 2005, the average age at divorce was **44 years for men and 41.4 for women** and may soon rise to reflect the fact that men and women now marry later--at 29.5 years for men and 26.9 for women in 2005; in Quebec, in 2007, it was 32 years for men and 30 for women while, in France, it was 35.6 years for men

and 32.2 for women. In both cases, more couples cohabit before marriage while others remain uncoupled longer than before (Insee, 2008). These two factors delay marriage and may inhibit its occurrence.

But we do have to be careful when we consider divorce statistics by age because, among older persons, a divorce at age 60+ may be a first one after a long marriage or a second or n^{th} one. For instance, for men 65-87 who divorced in 1990-92, the average duration of their first marriage had been 37.8 years, while subsequent divorces occurred after an average of 14 years of remarriage (Gentleman and Park, 1997). The more frequently people divorce and remarry, the shorter each subsequent remarriage (Ambert, 1989).

How many children are involved in divorce cases?

The number of dependent children involved in a parental divorce was 36,252 in 1998—the total number of divorces had been 69,088. The numbers are probably equivalent today. Strohschein et al. (2009) have estimated that about 20% of the 1984 birth cohort of Manitoba children had experienced their parents' divorce by age 18. For their part, Juby et al. (2005) estimated that nearly 30% of Canadian children also born in 1984 had experienced the dissolution of their parents' marriage or cohabitation by age 15. Projecting these estimates to children born in the 2000s might result in somewhat lower percentages because the 1980s were the peak years for divorce in Canada. However, including parental cohabitations and Quebec would certainly result in percentages equivalent to those above.

Many couples who divorce either have no children or do not have many, in great part because a good proportion of divorces occur within the first few years of marriage. As well, the divorced who have children do not have as many children as couples of their age who remain married: it is not clear whether this is because couples who have a stable marriage are more likely to add a second or third child to their family or if a larger number of children inhibits divorce, at least during the children's young years (Vanderschelden, 2006). But what we know is that the presence of children at home is related to a lower divorce rate (Clark and Crompton, 2006). Yet, in remarriages, the presence of a woman's children from a previous marriage increases the risk of divorce (Teachman, 2008).

For Canada, there are no estimates of the number of children who experience multiple parental divorces. In the U.S., 15% of *all* children will see their *custodial* parent divorce *more than once* before age 18; and nearly 50% of children in divorced families see their parent divorce again. The research indicates that such multiple familial transitions correlate with declining well-being in children and an increase in behavioral problems (Fomby and Cherlin, 2007).

As well, many children who live in cohabitational families experience the dissolution of their parents' union. Although no official statistics exist, we know that such children are more likely to experience a parental separation than children whose parents are married.

Celine Le Bourdais and her colleagues (2004) have found that Quebec children whose parents cohabit have a threefold chance of going through a parental separation compared to children in married families; the risk for the remainder of Canadian children was nearly 5 times greater than that of children with married parents. Similar results have been found in the U.S. (Osborne et al., 2007).

Who is responsible for children after divorce?

In Canada in 2002, Bill C-22 was introduced to change the terms "custody" and "access" to "joint exercise of parental responsibility" and "parenting schedules." Although Bill C-22 did not become law, and the conventional language is used by the courts (as required by the Divorce Act and provincial family law statutes) the language used by parents and lawyers in agreements has changed. Both in Canada and the U.S., children are predominantly in the **physical custody** of their mother. Joint physical custody, where the children spend at least 40% of their time with each parent, represents less than 10% of divorce custody orders, although this percentage is increasing slowly. Only about 10% of children live with their father—a percentage which has not changed much over the years despite the fact that **joint legal custody** has become more common and now accounts for about 46.5% of all divorce custody orders.

Mothers prefer sole custody but are favorable to joint responsibility when they perceive their ex-husbands to be good parents and when the post-marital relationship is not conflictual (Wilcox et al., 1998). In this respect, in February 2005, the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that joint custody should not be granted when parents cannot communicate effectively with one another about the care of their child(ren).

Resident fathers compared to resident mothers are more likely to be remarried or have another adult living with them. Overall, custodial fathers have fewer resident children, and fewer young ones, than custodial mothers. Fathers who have young children or many tend not to seek their custody (Drapeau et al., 2000). Residence with their children tends to result in a better father-child relationship and contributes to fathers' mental health (Arendell, 1995). Resident fathers are less likely to experience feelings of lack of control over their paternal situation, as is the case among nonresidential fathers. However, resident fathers are more likely to find their role constraining—they have less freedom and more demands placed on them—and are less happy as persons than visiting fathers (Shapiro and Lambert, 1999).

About 15% of nonresident fathers never visit their children while another 25% do so irregularly (Marcil-Gratton, 1999). There are factors inherent to the structure of being a nonresidential parent that inhibit contact with and active parenting of children who are nonresidential (Gaudet and Devault, 2006). These include the presence of "new" children, geographical distance, and duration of separation (Manning et al., 2004). Low income is a key factor because it often places severe constraints on a father's time, resources, lodging, and availability (Swiss and Le Bourdais, 2009).

As well, new theories suggest that children's characteristics play a role in these parent-child dynamics (Ambert, 2001). Indeed, recent studies indicate that they affect both the level and quality of paternal time: fathers are less likely to be closely involved with nonresident adolescents who have behavioral, mood, and academic problems (Hawkins et al., 2007). Such adolescents may discourage their fathers from getting involved, may be aversive, and may place obstacles to visiting with them. In turn, in a causality feedback perspective, this means that these same adolescents then have less support, which may compound their problems: research is unanimous to the effect that children do far better cognitively and behaviorally when their father remains an active parent (Allard et al., 2005). Amato and Gilbreth (1999) suggest that children of divorce have better outcomes when *nonresidential fathers* are more than

"Sunday daddies" and participate more fully *as parents*—that is, when they provide emotional and practical support, make behavioral demands, place limits on what can be done, and administer consistent discipline. This being said, it is possible that older adolescents are less impacted by parents than by their own choices outside the familial context as presented to them by our current culture (Ambert, 2007).

How common is remarriage?

Remarriage has become less common because of the increasing tendency to cohabit after divorce (Beaupre, 2008). Approximately 70% and 58%, respectively, of divorced men and women remarry in Canada, excluding Quebec, and remarriage is more common among immigrants than Canadian-born citizens. In Quebec, remarriage has become a minority phenomenon because of a preference for cohabitation.

How many families with dependent children are stepfamilies?

In Canada, the term "stepfamilies" includes both marital and cohabitational unions while, in the U.S., the term usually refers exclusively to remarried families. In Canada, one- half of stepfamilies are remarriages. In Quebec, nearly 75% of all stepfamilies are common-law unions whereas less than 45% of stepfamilies are common-law in Ontario, the Prairies, and B.C.

In 2001, in Canada, 12% of families composed of a couple with children were stepfamilies, for a total of 503,100. Of these stepfamilies, 50% included only the mother's child(ren) from a previous union; 10% included only the father's child; 8% consisted of both spouses' children from previous unions; and 32% included a child born to the union in addition to the children born from previous ones (Turcotte, 2002). About 10% of all Canadian children under the age of 12 are living in a stepfamily.

Are remarriages as stable as first marriages?

No. Although remarriages are as happy as first marriages, controlling for the number of years married, remarriages after a divorce have a higher rate of dissolution, probably 10% higher (Glossop, 2002). But remarriages that endure often outlast a first marriage. In the U.S., remarriages that are preceded by cohabitation are even less stable (Xu et al., 2006).

Why are remarriages less stable? First, remarriages include persons who have already proven that they can divorce; they may be more accepting of divorce as a solution and more ready to have recourse to it a second time. Second, spouses in remarriages may be less willing to compromise and may become disenchanted more rapidly. Third, there are fewer norms that guide these relationships, making it more difficult for the spouses to feel secure within their respective roles. Fourth, the structure itself of remarriage is a more complex one when children are brought in along with ex-spouses and ex-in-laws. Indeed, remarriages without children from previous unions or only with children born to the union have a rate of divorce equivalent to that of first marriages (Glossop, 2002).

Are cohabitations as stable as marriages?

We have already begun addressing this question above concerning children with cohabiting parents. In Canada, cohabitation unions are more likely to dissolve than legal marriages, and in this sense they are less stable. Moreover, this is true in most countries of the world (Adams and Trost, 2005). Cohabitations tend to dissolve more rapidly than marriages—perhaps with the exception of couples who begin cohabiting at a more advanced age (King and Scott, 2005). About one-half all cohabiting unions that do not turn into marriages end within five years (Milan, 2000). The reasons for this are detailed later.

However, cohabitations are somewhat more stable in Quebec than in the rest of Canada, perhaps because they are more institutionalized and socially accepted than in the other provinces (Kerr et al., 2006). For instance, based on 2001 information, Turcotte (2002) estimated that 55% of Quebec women aged 30 to 39 who opted for cohabitation as a first union will go through a separation compared to 66% among women in the other provinces. Nevertheless, in all provinces, cohabitations are more likely to dissolve than marriages, but are more stable when children are born to the union.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DIVORCE IN CANADA

Multiple, interlocking factors have contributed to the rapid rise of divorce in Canada and other western countries in the second part of the 20th century. These same factors have contributed to the maintenance of relatively high rates of divorce into the 21st century as well as to increasing rates of cohabitation. Below, various cultural and demographic factors related to these higher rates of divorce are discussed, and then linked to the personal reasons people give for divorcing.

Cultural factors

1. Divorce rates were already inching upwardly in the 19th century as a result of secularization trends, the liberalization of norms concerning individual choice, and the lessening of religious influence. The religious aspect is now largely missing in the institution of marriage: this is often referred to as the desacralization of marriage. For many, marriage has become an individual choice rather than a covenant before God and this change has contributed to the acceptance of its temporal nature (Cherlin, 2004).
2. These socio-cultural trends later came to influence the passage of more liberal divorce laws. In turn, easier divorce laws, such as those promulgated in 1968 and 1985, are followed by an increase in divorce (see Table 2). Such laws signal the normalization of divorce: divorce lost its stigma and became more socially acceptable. These cultural and legal factors have made it easier for people to be less attached to marriage as an *institution* and consequently to turn to divorce as a solution.
3. The trends toward individualism that began two centuries ago have resulted in an emphasis on rights rather than duties. When individualism is coupled with an ideology of gratification, particularly sexual and psychological, where people are encouraged to be "happy" and "fulfilled," it follows that the

spouses' mentality about their marriage is affected. Marriage is less likely to be seen as an institution centered on mutual responsibilities and is more likely to be based on the pursuit of happiness, fulfillment, and companionship. More is demanded of marriage in terms of personal gratification. As Amato (2007:309) put it, in individualistic marriages, spouses view the marriage as valuable as long as it meets their needs for personal growth and self-actualization. "If the marital relationship no longer meets these needs, then spouses feel justified in jettisoning the relationship to seek out new partners who better meet these needs".

4. As a consequence of these trends, Canadians and most Westerners have developed a lower threshold of tolerance when their marriage does not meet with their expectations for personal fulfillment. All things considered, while more is expected of marriage, couples are also less tolerant about its challenges and less willing to shoulder the sacrifices it may require. On the other hand, however, this also means that women are more likely to leave abusive relationships that would otherwise have kept them captive 40 years ago.

Demographic factors

1. Statistics show that the **younger** people are at marriage, the more likely they are to divorce. Young people, especially adolescents, may lack the maturity and experience to cope with the demands of a marital relationship. Furthermore, their personalities have not yet stabilized so that their needs may change and upset the balance of their new marriage. Very young people also have low incomes; this, along with **low educational levels**, is another risk factor for divorce (Clark and Crompton, 2006).
2. **Low incomes and poverty** are risk factors because financial stressors often impact negatively on a marital relationship. On the other side of the equation, a **very rapid upward social mobility** where the acquisition of money and status is a prime mover is also a risk factor. This may be because such a pursuit of materialism takes time away from relationships or reflects individualistic values that are incompatible with a good conjugal life—which refers us back to the cultural factors mentioned earlier.
3. Another demographic factor related to divorce is **solo mothering in difficult economic circumstances.** Mothers who have children without a partner are more likely to be young and poor and to cohabit before marrying—thus combining many risk factors for divorce.
4. **Remarriages,** as we have seen earlier, are a risk factor for divorce, in great part because of the complexities of reconstituted families (Ambert, 2005a). This risk factor is becoming more salient. For instance, in 2000, 33% of all marriages had one or both partners who had been previously divorced and, of these, well over a third included two previously-divorced persons (Statistics Canada, 2003). Furthermore, families with a resident stepfather are less stable than families with a resident stepmother (Marcil-Gratton et al., 2003).
5. **Sex ratio**. Men are more likely to divorce when there is a high proportion of unmarried women with them in the labor force and the same occurs for women who work in domains with a male preponderance (South, at al., 2001). These conditions raise married persons', especially men's, chances of sexual infidelity and of forming new relationships. Similarly, when there is a sex ratio imbalance favoring men in a particular ethnic group in a city, this group may also have higher rates of serial cohabitation and divorce (Harknett, 2008).
6. **Parental divorce** correlates with higher divorce rates among children when they become adults (Liam and Wu, 2008). One study has even found that this occurs especially when the parental mar-

riage had a low level of conflict—such parents may divorce simply because they are less committed to marriage and may transmit this value to their offspring (Amato and DeBoer, 2001).

7. **Low religiosity** is related to lower marital happiness and a higher propensity to divorce (Clark and Crompton, 2006; Treas and Giesen, 2000; Tremblay et al., 2002). Furthermore, religious and to some extent racial heterogamy are risk factors for marital instability, perhaps because of a lack of shared values (Heaton, 2002).
8. **Cohabitatio**n prior to marriage has been until now a strong risk factor to a first divorce (Clark and Crompton, 2006; Marcil-Gratton et al., 2003). But there is recent evidence that cohabiting only with a future spouse does not increase the risk of divorcing (Teachman, 2008). As well, this link between prior cohabitation and later divorce may diminish as cohabitation becomes more prevalent and lasts longer before marriage (Hewitt and de Vaus, 2009).

Why does cohabitation before marriage not prevent divorce?

It used to be believed that living together before marriage would teach people both to avoid marrying the wrong person (and probably it does for some) and practice relationship skills; in this process of "trial marriage," it was reasoned, a future marriage would become stronger and divorce less likely. It did not turn out this way. Why not? Because, until now, there has been both a double process of selection into pre-marital cohabitation as well as one of causality that have resulted in higher divorce rates following pre-marital cohabitations.

A. First, there has been to some extent a double process of **selection** involved: cohabitation represents for many couples, particularly men, a lesser commitment than marriage (Clarkberg et al., 1996). This situation exists even in countries such as Sweden and Norway where cohabitation is widespread (Wiik et al., 2009). Some individuals select themselves into cohabitation because it requires, in their opinion, less sexual faithfulness than in marriage, or because cohabitation is viewed as an alternative to the lifelong commitment assumed by marriage. Cohabitation is easier to get into and easier to get out of than marriage. Therefore, there is less reason to "work" at maintaining a relationship that may never have been viewed as a life-long commitment to begin with. For instance, Homann-Marriott (2006) reports that couples who cohabit have somewhat less positive problem solving behaviors and are less supportive of each other on average than those who have not cohabited before marriage. Therefore, it cannot be said that cohabitation necessarily constitutes a "trial" marriage because of lower levels of commitment (Ambert, 2005b). However, many such less committed couples move on to marriage, and may not be ready for the required commitment. As a result, divorce may follow.

The other part of the process of selection exists at the level of personal attributes, including lower income and lack of religiosity, that contribute to the risk for divorce. Couples who first cohabit are less religious than those who marry without cohabiting. As we have seen earlier, there is a correlation between religiosity and marital happiness as well as stability. If couples who are both less religious and less committed to each other and to the institution of marriage cohabit and then go on to marry, it is not surprising that they will have a higher divorce rate—a phenomenon which is particularly relevant to Quebec where religiosity is very low in terms of church attendance and cohabitation is generally chosen as a first union.

B. Second, not only is there a selection process, but there is mounting evidence of a causality effect. That is, the experience of a less secure, committed, and at times less faithful cohabitation shapes subsequent marital behavior (Dush et al., 2003). Such couples continue to live their marriage through the perspective of the insecurity, low commitment, and even lack of fidelity of their prior cohabitation. Others simply learn to accept the temporary nature of relationships (Smock and Gupta, 2002). The result is a marriage at risk (Wu, 2000).

Therefore, people both select themselves into cohabitation, especially serial cohabitations, because of personal and demographic characteristics; in turn, cohabitation shapes subsequent marital behaviors in ways that may be detrimental to marital relationships. Hence, the increased divorce rates. However, as cohabitation has become more socially acceptable, more frequent, and better supported legally both before a first marriage and after a divorce, the following changes may be occurring:

1. The process of selection may no longer be playing as significant a role as in the past if the differences between persons who cohabit and then marry and those who marry without cohabiting are diminishing. As a result, cohabitants may become more representative of the population that marries than in the past.
2. If cohabitation becomes more institutionalized, both as a prelude to marriage and as a relationship in itself, its behavioral contents will evolve so that commitment, sexual fidelity, and feelings of security will be equivalent to those found in marriage. Therefore, the experience itself of cohabitation will promote, rather than weaken, future marital commitment. For instance, in Australia where cohabitations are now of longer duration, this new development seems to be reducing the risk of divorce (Hewitt and de Vaus, 2009). However, even in Sweden and Norway, cohabitants with no intention to marry their current partner report a far less committed relationship than those with marital intentions (Wiik et al., 2009).

One important caveat is, however, necessary: more young people as well as more post-divorce adults engage in **serial** cohabitations than was the case in the past, at times accumulating many such relationships over the years. Just as persons who divorce multiple times seem to differ on some key dimensions compared to the once-divorced, one should expect that future research will find similar results for serial cohabitants —for we already know that serial cohabitants who marry have higher divorce rates than those who had cohabited only with their eventual spouse (Lichter and Qian, 2008). In other words, the process of selection and of behavioral shaping will continue to characterize serial cohabitants.

In conclusion, when a committed couple decides to cohabit, one can reasonably expect that, within the current social context, their relationship will last, especially when they marry. However, couples with a history of multiple cohabitations with others will continue to be a risk factor for divorce and cohabitation break ups—and, one could hypothesize, a risk for the children they may have: these children could suffer from their parents' multiple conjugal transitions as they will be less likely to have a home and parental environment that is child oriented (Cherlin, 2009).

Personal reasons for divorcing

The personal reasons or explanations that people give for their divorce, such as alcoholism, domestic

violence, infidelity, "didn't get along," "no longer loved each other" and "money problems" actually flow from the socio-cultural and demographic factors discussed earlier. For instance, without an emphasis on individualism and gratification, people would not divorce as often because they "fell out of love." In countries where marriage is embedded within a context of family solidarity, these reasons would be considered frivolous. In a society where divorce is more difficult to obtain and less acceptable, or where marriage may represent the only legitimate means of forming and maintaining a family or obtaining economic security, only reasons such as abuse and abandonment are tolerated. Therefore, before people decide to divorce on particular grounds, a social and cultural climate has to exist that offers a legitimate framework for their reasons.

Furthermore, personal grounds for divorce such as fighting, alcoholism, violence, tend to be mentioned more by couples with some of the demographic characteristics discussed earlier, such as youthful marriages, parental divorce, multiple prior cohabitations, and poverty. Thus, cultural and demographic factors related to divorce "push" people into divorce via their own interpersonal mechanisms. It is interesting to note that domestic violence as one of the reasons for divorce is less frequently mentioned than in the past in Canada and in other Western countries such as Holland (de Graaf and Kalmijn, 2006). This finding is consistent with studies showing a decline in conjugal violence between 1993 and 2004 (Laroche, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2006).

CONSEQUENCES OF DIVORCE

This section begins with an examination of the two most salient consequences of divorce: **poverty** and an increased risk for the development of **problems** among the children involved. Then, consequences for adults will be discussed. These consequences apply not only to Canada and the U.S., but to most countries of the world. In many countries, divorced women suffer additional consequences, such as discrimination and the loss of their children.

Increased risk of poverty

We have already seen that poverty increases the risk of divorce. In turn, divorce also increases the risk of poverty for a large proportion of women and their children (Finnie, 1993; Galarneau and Sturroch, 1997). Rotermann (2007) found that, within two years after a separation/divorce, 43% of women had experienced a decrease in household income compared to 15% of men. In contrast, 29% of men and only 9% of women had experienced an increase. Even three years after divorce, women's household income remains far below what it had been during marriage and far below their ex-husbands' current income. However, as more women are employed and earn better salaries, this income decline is less painful than before, even though it is still evident.

Ex-husbands, compared to ex-wives, are less likely to be poor because their income is generally higher, they do not have full care of their children with all the attendant expenses, and their child support pay-

ments are usually not crippling. Nevertheless, in a decade when most families have two breadwinners, men who divorce lose far more economically than in the past, especially those married to a high-earning wife. As child support payments become better enforced, economic factors may contribute in the long run to dissuade some men from ending their marriage.

For families already burdened by poverty, once separation takes place, the mother and child unit often becomes even poorer. The younger the children are at the time of parental divorce or common-law dissolution, the more likely they are to be poor, as they have younger parents who typically earn less. On average, single parents who are poor have an income that is 40% below the poverty line. This is dire poverty. Another way of looking at this is to consider single-mother families. In 2002, according to the Vanier Institute of the Family (2004), 35% of all female lone-parent families lived in poverty while many more hovered just one precarious step above. Canada, the U.S., and England are the three western countries in which single-parent families experience elevated poverty rates and where a vast difference exists between the incomes of single- and two-parent families.

Poverty is a thread that runs through many of the points presented later on in this paper.

Increased risk of problems for children of divorced parents

In a nutshell, although most children do *not* experience serious developmental problems as a result of divorce or separation, divorce is certainly a strong risk factor and a source of stressors. Divorce is, above all, an emotionally painful transition and, as Kelly and Emery (2003:359) point out, it can "create lingering feelings of sadness, longing, worry, and regret that coexist with competent psychological and social functioning."

Although <u>average</u> differences are not huge (Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001; Le Blanc et al., 1995; Sun and Li, 2002), children whose parents are divorced (and even after they are remarried or re-partnered) are *more likely* than children whose parents remain together to:

- suffer from depression, anxiety, and other emotional disorders;
- exhibit behavioral problems including hyperactivity, aggressiveness, fighting, and hostility;
- become young offenders;
- do less well in school and remain in school for a shorter period of time;
- experience more relationship problems, in part due to their behavioral problems.

Finally, adults whose parents divorced during their childhood and teen years, compared to adults from intact two-parent families (Martin et al., 2005), tend to:

- have a child out of wedlock more often, particularly during adolescence;
- achieve lower educational levels;
- be more often unemployed and do less well economically;
- have more marital problems and divorce more;
- are more likely to have lost contact with their father and to report a less happy childhood (Williams, 2001).

As well, a study by Boyd and Norris (1995) has found that older children of divorced parents leave home earlier than others. They leave home in even greater numbers when their custodial parent remarries and

more so when both parents remarry. (We have no information about cohabitation; however, the results are probably similar or more salient.) A consequence of this earlier home leaving is that it becomes too expensive to continue their education. This, in turn, leads to lower occupational skills and higher unemployment. Frederick and Boyd (1998) have shown, on the basis of Statistics Canada data, that 80% of men and 84% women aged 20-44 who lived with their two parents when they were 15 years old had completed high school. This compares with figures ranging from 65 to 73% for those whose parents had divorced, including those whose parents had remarried.

Cautionary notes in interpreting the above information

The first is that, among an unknown number of children, *some* of what appear to be negative effects of divorce already existed before parental separation. That is to say, some children and adolescents who experienced difficulties after divorce already experienced difficulties *before* divorce, either because of inter-parental conflict, lack of parenting investment, parents' anti-social behavior, or their own personalities, choice of peers, and conflicts with parents (Ambert, 2001). Therefore, when studying children after divorce, it is important to know how they were before the divorce.

Still, researchers who utilize a longitudinal methodology have found that, even when these past characteristics are taken into account, additive effects specifically attributable to divorce remain (Strohschein, 2005). Some of these effects have been shown to persist beyond the childhood years (Cherlin et al, 1998). As well, as Kerr and Michalski (2007) point out, nowadays only a small proportion of divorces are the result of a very conflictual marriage: children are therefore less likely than in the past to be negatively affected by their parents' marital conflict before separation and divorce occur. However, children whose parents break up a highly dysfunctional marriage often experience a *decrease* in behavioral problems (Strohschein, 2005).

The second cautionary note is that many of the consequences of divorce on children and adolescents are actually related to poverty rather than the divorce of their parents. We return to this issue later.

The third important point is that, whatever statistics one reads concerning the negative outcomes of children "of divorce," they do *not* apply to *all* these children (Corak, 2001). Rather, what these statistics indicate is that children of divorced parents have a greater *risk* of developing problems than children whose parents remain together. As well, Pedro-Carroll (2001) points out that *one has to differentiate between distress and disorder*. Most children of divorce experience a certain level of distress, which often lasts for over a decade. For instance, they miss the other parent and, when little, they may feel that they are partly to blame for the divorce; some desperately try to get their parents together again; they are sad; some cry a lot while others lash out and develop temporary behavioral problems. But, despite their distress, most still function well, that is, do not experience "disorders" (Laumann-Billings and Emory, 2000).

Nevertheless, one should not err in the opposite direction and shrug off the negative effects of divorce. *They are real and costly* for children, parents, and schools, as well as the welfare and health care systems (for a review, see Ambert, 2005a).

The five main sources of children's negative outcomes following a parental divorce

1. As we have seen, **poverty**, or even a **significant reduction in financial resources**, often precedes or follows divorce, and is a root cause of many children's problems. In fact, the "typical" negative outcomes of children of divorce resemble those of children in poverty (for a review, see Ambert, 2005a).

When children are poor or become poor, they experience many additional stressors in their lives because divorce is not a single event but a series of transitions. To begin with, a great proportion of Canadian women and their children move after separation, often to more crowded and dilapidated housing, where there is more noise and pollution. They and their mothers may be less healthy as a result and more stressed (see Kohen et al., 2008). The neighborhood may be less safe, have more children who are equally poor, who do less well in school, and engage more in delinquency. Having to adjust to a new and often more difficult peer group can create a great deal of problems—loneliness, bullying, school avoidance, and delinquency. Moreover, the custodial parent, generally the mother, may have to work long hours to make ends meet. When she returns home, she may be tired, preoccupied, and have less time to devote to her children. As a result, children of divorced mothers who are poor or near poor may receive less attention, guidance, supervision, encouragement, and affection than other children.

Thus, if we were to eliminate or even significantly reduce child poverty, the consequences of divorce and of single parenting on children would not disappear but would be far less negative.

2. The above paragraph has already hinted at the second source of children's problems after divorce: **diminished parenting**—especially lower supervision. Divorce creates a series of stressors for parents, particularly for custodial parents. Many divorced parents are so preoccupied and emotionally burdened that they become depressed while others initiate a desperate search for a new mate that makes them far less available to their children. In turn, stressors and preoccupations diminish parenting time, skills, expressed affection, supervision while increasing parenting instability, harshness, or yet permissiveness. Many become less able to shelter their children from stressors and dangers; others become their pals and abdicate their parental responsibilities—and this especially occurs among nonresident parents. Adolescents then lack guidance and authoritative parenting. In contrast, a decent family income, mothers' sound psychological functioning, and a good home environment, including adequate parenting, reduce or eliminate the potentially negative effects of divorce and single parenting (Carlson and Corcoran, 2001).

3. Parents who continue or begin quarreling and verbally abusing each other in front of their children after divorce cause immense distress to their offspring. **Parental conflict** after separation—especially when children are caught in the middle—may result in depression, hostility, aggressiveness, and other acting-out activities. Moreover, parental conflict within or after the marriage presents a dysfunctional role model. Children learn that disagreements can be solved only by fighting. This lesson may carry further negative consequences down the road in their own relationships.

We are now hearing about an extreme problem that has always existed but has only recently been "discovered" and labeled: p*arental alienation* occurs when one parent more or less brainwashes a child

against the other parent and effectively prevents that parent from seeing the child and the child from loving that parent. The child may in fact come to reject the hapless parent (Gagne et al., 2005; Pigg, 2009) and the consequences for the child's future mental health can be dire.

While divorces that end severe inter-parental conflict may have positive consequences for children, low-conflict marriages that end in divorce have a strong negative effect on children, perhaps because, from the children's point of view, the divorce is so unexpected, unwelcome, and useless (Booth and Amato, 2001). As well, such divorces may signal parents' lack of commitment to marriage and this value may be passed on to their children who will then transpose it into their own relationships.

It should be emphasized that research has yet to separate the effect on children of two types of parental conflict: that within the marriage and that following separation. Fewer marriages ending in divorce are highly conflictual than in the past (Kerr and Michalski, 2007). However, it occurs that some marriages that are non-conflictual result in divorces that are very acrimonious, a situation that children had not had to face when their parents were together. Therefore, parental conflict following separation/divorce may be a separate cause of some children's negative outcomes.

4. Some of the parents' reasons for divorcing (such as conflict) may have produced a very dysfunctional home for the children and the negative consequences of this home on children do not disappear the instant parents separate. Such parents may in addition have been ineffective both because of their troubled relationship and their difficult personalities. Thus, as we have seen earlier, these children had **pre-existing problems** which divorce may further exacerbate (Cherlin et al., 1998).

5. A last source is one that is rarely mentioned but is nonetheless important: **genetics**. A proportion of people who divorce or end a cohabitation, do so because they are temperamental, conflictual, or impulsive individuals who pass on these predispositions to their children via genetic inheritance. The children are then both predisposed to being problematic and live in a home environment that is conflict-ridden, disorganized, and fosters their negative predispositions. When divorce happens in these situations, the home conditions may worsen, thereby exacerbating the children's existing problems in a circular or feedback model of causality (Ambert, 2005a:19-20; 376-383).

Are there differences by age and sex in children's adjustment to divorce?

Research results are not entirely consistent. Girls adapt generally better to divorce although not necessarily to the remarriage or re-partnering of a custodial mother. There is, however, a wide diversity of adaptation levels depending on the child's personality and family circumstances. The same applies in terms of age. On the one hand, very small children may not note the absence of a parent they have rarely seen; if the mother who has always been their primary caretaker functions well, they will not be significantly affected. They will also adapt better to a parental remarriage. On the other hand, children between 4 and 10 years of age may be the most negatively affected because they are not mature enough to understand their loss and their changing family circumstances. They may even blame themselves for the divorce.

Moreover, when poverty is present, these young children are likely to be even more affected than ado-

lescents, particularly in terms of their intellectual development (Strohschein et al., 2009). Indeed, the research clearly indicates that poverty during the early childhood years hinders cognitive and verbal development and consequently delays small children's adaptation into kindergarten (Ambert, 2005a:146). Many of these children arrive in Grade 1 unprepared to learn and a cycle of educational failure begins. In contrast, a child who becomes poor during adolescence may already have a solid foundation on which to build success in the educational system.

Even so, older children can also be significantly affected by the five main sources of negative outcomes discussed earlier. For adolescents, a particularly difficult situation arises when the custodial parent loses the opportunity of communicating with and supervising them. Adolescence is already an age when opportunities to engage in risk behaviours abound and a youth who is bereft of parental support may more easily succumb to detrimental peer pressures. School work may suffer accordingly. Adolescent girls, whose parents have separated, are at higher risk than others of becoming sexually active and pregnant (Wu, 1996). This risk is further elevated when their custodial mother is openly active sexually.

What are the consequences of parental remarriage on children?

There is not much research on this topic in Canada and the American literature, although quite pertinent, is not entirely consistent. Until now, this research has looked at the gender and, to some extent, the age of children at parents' remarriage. It is only recently that studies have focused on the fact that, when the custodial parent remarries, **the child becomes a stepchild**. This familial restructuration requires a great deal of adjustment on their part. As well, in a third of stepfamilies, a new child is born who is the couple's shared child. Therefore, at some point after one of their parents' re-partnering, many stepchildren **become half-siblings.**

The following is a summary of relevant research on parental remarriage and children:

1. A custodial mother's remarriage helps the family financially and may be very good for her in terms of happiness (Morrison and Ritualo, 2000). In turn, improved finances and maternal well-being may benefit children.
2. Children benefit when their non-resident parent, generally their father, remains involved in their lives as an <u>active</u> parent and not just a "Sunday daddy" (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999).
3. Younger children usually adapt better, especially when they have always known the stepparent. Many children and adolescents have a close relationship with their resident stepfather and this relates to better outcomes, especially when they also maintain a supportive relationship with their non-resident father (King, 2006). Many boys are advantaged by the addition of an authoritative (not to be confused with authoritarian) adult male role model in the family. Even small children benefit when a resident step father is involved with them (Bzostek, 2008). Yet, on some measures, young stepchildren still fare less well than other children (Kerr and Michalski, 2007).
4. Results are mixed regarding gender-based outcomes among stepchildren (Kirby, 2006). For instance, girls who had a close relationship with their mother may resent what they consider to be "the intruder." In my research, some women students admitted having purposely destroyed their mother's remarriage by becoming horrendous and behaving badly toward the new husband (Ambert, 2005a). Girls are also more likely to be sexually abused by their stepfathers or mothers' boyfriends than by

their own fathers (Giles-Sims, 1997). For their part, boys tend, in adolescence, to spend less time at home—which may in itself lead to risk-taking behaviour and even delinquency.

5. We have already mentioned that older adolescents and young adults tend to leave home earlier once their custodial parent remarries. This may be a result of conflict with the stepparent, or because the new couple makes them feel like intruders, or because they are subtly or not so subtly encouraged to leave.
6. Studies of young adults whose custodial parent's *remarriage has endured* have shown that these offspring were strongly attached to their reconstituted family and benefited emotionally from it. It is thus possible that some of the positive effects of a parent's good remarriage do not appear until later in adulthood (see Sun and Li, 2008).
7. Recent research indicates that **new children** born to blended families may have more problems than children living with their still-married parents (Halpern-Meekin and Tach, 2008).
8. Children in a remarriage, whether they are stepchildren or a new child born to the remarriage, have on average less positive outcomes than children whose parents have never divorced (Halpern-Meekin and Tach, 2008; Hofferth, 2006).

I hypothesize that a parental cohabitation, rather than remarriage, may be less functional for stepchildren, especially when it takes place rapidly after parental separation (Juby et al., 2007). This is because cohabitations have a higher dissolution rate and may bring additional stressors to children's lives, especially if it heightens a mother's or father's sense of insecurity and diminishes the quality of her or his parenting. Cohabiting stepparent families bring far more boundary ambiguity than married ones (Brown and Manning, 2009) and probably result in far less support from kin, at least at the outset—and this might be especially so with multiple prior cohabitations that had resulted in fertility (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2009).

Overall, the research has consistently shown that children who live with their original married parents have fewer behavioral problems than other children, including children who live with their own cohabiting parents (Hofferth, 2006; Kerr and Michalski, 2007)). However, one can hypothesize that differences between children of married and cohabiting parents are less salient in Quebec.

What are the consequences of divorce for adults?

There is a lack of consensus in the research on this question. On the negative side, as we have seen, poverty and financial hardship loom for a proportion of divorcing women, and to a lesser extent, divorcing men. Women who are older at the time of divorce and with little employment experience have a more difficult time. As well, there is often a loss of social support, mainly from ex-in-laws and friends whom the couple shared. When divorced fathers age, they are less likely to receive support from their children than do other fathers (Lin, 2007). The spouse who is left generally suffers more, at least in the first three years (Sweeney, 2002). Being abandoned because of another man or woman is especially ego shattering.

Alcohol abuse increases among divorced men and mothers with young children at home. A large study found that the negative effect of divorce on psychological well-being especially affected parents of young children, particularly women. Parental strains, economic problems, and the stressors of having to maintain contact with the ex-spouse are explanatory factors (Williams and Dunne-Bryant, 2006). Depression among divorced women as well as a general feeling of being less healthy often occur (Wu and Hart,

2002). Rotermann (2007) reports even more depression among men after divorce.

We should keep in mind that marital conflict is a significant risk for mental and physical problems (Choi and Marks, 2008) so that remaining in a bad marriage will itself produce noxious effects. However, Rotermann's (2007) longitudinal study included bad marriages, and episodes of depression were still more prevalent after divorce.

Many divorced persons admit that they are not any happier while others are even unhappier than during their marriage (Ambert, 1989). In fact, Waite et al. (2002) have found that even unhappily married people were not necessarily happier five years after their divorce than those who had remained married. Another study found that persons in high-distress marriages were happier after divorce whereas those who had been in relatively comfortable marriages were unhappier (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Divorce generally involves a period of stress, instability, loneliness, hurt feelings, and often hostility. That period of transition is often related to health problems (Dupre and Meadows, 2007). Longer longitudinal studies are needed to see whether these effects diminish over time. One also has to consider that some effects, both for adults and children, may not appear until later in life.

Furthermore, as shown by the high rates of divorce in remarriages and dissolution of subsequent cohabitations, one divorce often triggers many other painful transitions. In addition, the burden of divorce may impact more heavily on minority groups that are racialized and disadvantaged. American studies have found that mothers from such groups may not be able to form new or stable unions because of a shortage of available, responsible males in their city (Harknett, 2008). Research still needs to be carried out in Canada, but Canadian studies of poverty and single-parenting among Aboriginal and black people suggest that similar outcomes may be emerging in Canada (for summary, see Ambert, 2005a:108-110; Calliste, 2003; Gionet, 2009).

On the positive side, for many, especially women, divorce results in the discovery of new strengths, the building of supportive relationships, and in some instances, the relief from fear. For many as well, it means a new love that remains "until death do us part." There is such a thing as a "successful" divorce (Ambert, 2005a). But, often, ex-spouses have to work hard at it when they share children. In conclusion, research results on the consequences of divorce for adults are not consistent and there is a wide diversity of experiences. As well, studies do not cover sufficiently extended periods of time after divorce. This makes it difficult to draw solid conclusions. All things being said, even for adults, divorce is no cure all for everyone involved.

For society as a whole, *the dissolution of average to good marriages* (approximately a third of all divorces *and probably cohabitations)* is a costly proposition in terms of consequent problems for children, including juvenile delinquency, welfare costs for single-parent families that fall into poverty, health costs, as well as a loss of productivity on the part of affected adults and older children.

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of divorce is a far more complex issue than generally believed. Furthermore, statistics pertaining to divorce are difficult to understand and, as a result, are frequently misinterpreted. A little over a third of all marriages in Canada end in divorce; the rates are higher in some provinces and higher for remarriages. Rates of dissolution for cohabitations are not available but are much higher than those for marriages. It is regrettable that we do not have more information regarding the dissolution of cohabitations, especially when they involve children. However, it appears that rates of dissolution are somewhat lower in Quebec where cohabitations are better institutionalized than is the case in the rest of Canada (Marcil-Gratton et al., 2003). Yet, divorce rates are much higher in Quebec.

There is no basis for comforting predictions of a sharp decline or for alarmist predictions of a sharp increase in divorce rates in the *near* future.

Divorce is necessary in any society. This said, divorce and remarriage are **adult institutions**. That is, they were intended to separate couples who could no longer live together and to allow ex-spouses to repartner. However, these institutions are not always in the best interest of children. And, as seen earlier, divorce is not necessarily a positive experience for adults either.

It is well documented that divorce is often accompanied by poverty or a significant reduction in financial resources. This factor contributes to amplifying the negative effects of divorce on the mother-child family unit, on the father child relationship and on children's life chances. In some European societies, particularly Norway and Sweden, the **social safety net** compensates greatly so that single-mother families have a (low) rate of poverty similar to that of two-parent families.

In countries with a more equitable income distribution, the negative consequences of divorce for children do not disappear but are less pronounced than they are in Canada, the U.S., and the UK.

Studies also indicate that a sizeable proportion of marriages that end in divorce were actually quite "salvageable," even happy, and that many of these ex-spouses are no better off after (Ambert, 1989). It seems that there may be two types of divorce: those resulting from a truly unhappy marriage and those resulting from a weak commitment to marriage (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Ambert, 1989). After 30 years of studying divorce, I have come to conclude that, although divorce is necessary, some divorces are avoidable and unnecessary; the same remark certainly applies to serious cohabitational unions that dissolve. In light of this, couples who marry or who live together should be encouraged to face the inevitability of ups and downs in relationships—and I am not referring here to severe conflict, which afflicts far fewer couples than in the past. Connidis (2003) remarks that relationships are changed after divorce and have to be re-negotiated over the years. The effects are felt across several generations within a family.

It is often said that the family has become an outdated institution: High rates of divorce, cohabitation, and births to solo mothers are often used to justify this statement. Is this true? No. As is documented elsewhere (Ambert, 2005a), families fulfill more functions now than was the case 50 years ago. What is also true is that conjugal dissolution (marriage + cohabitation) *complicates* and *burdens* family life but does not destroy it. As a result, the capacity of many such families to provide for the care and socialization of children as well as for help across generations is diminished.

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