Sociology Essay: “Examine the reasons for the changes in the patterns of marriage, cohabitation and divorce in the last 45 years”

In the last 45 years, there have been many changes in the patterns of marriage, cohabitation and divorce – these reasons shall be analysed.

In recent years, marriage has had many pattern changes. For one, few humans are marrying, as illustrated by how in 2005, 170,800 first marriages took place, which is less than half the number for 1970. Furthermore, there are more remarriages, as shown by how in 2005, four out of every ten marriages were re-marriages – this pattern of marriage to divorce to re-marriage has been named ‘serial monogamy’. Plus, humans are now marrying later as indicated by how the average age of first marriages rose by seven years between 1971 and 2005. Withal, couples are less likely to marry in Church – in 1981, 60% of weddings were carried out with religious ceremonies, though this fell to 35% by 2005.

A reason for the changing patterns is the changing attitudes to marriage in that there is less of a pressure to marry and so more freedom to establish the type of relationship that one desires; the norm of everyone getting married has greatly declined. Secularisation ties in with this as whilst churches support marriage, their once great influence has declined – this is clearly shown in a 2001 Census whereby only 3% of young persons with no religion were married, in contrast to 17% of those with a religion.

What is more, there is a declining stigma to the alternatives to marriage – cohabitation, lone parenthood and having children outside of wedlock are now regarded as acceptable – this is showcased by how in interviews for the British Social Attitudes Survey in 1989, 70% believed that couples who desire children should get married, but by 2000, only 54% thought the same.

As previously mentioned, females now have superior educational and career prospects so that they now can choose to not marry and instead sustain themselves, or if they do, are not financially dependent on their partner. Also, the view of marriage being an oppressive and patriarchal institution has been promoted by some feminists, thus deterring some females from marrying. To boot, due to the high divorce rate, some humans are dissuaded from marrying, ascribed to the perceived potential for divorce.

Studies have shown that the rising number of divorces allows for more humans available to re-marry and that the age at which couples marry is rising as many humans are opting to postpone marriage in order to establish a career, as signified by the number of couples who cohabit before marrying.

The number of cohabiting couples is ever increasing, as shown by how there are over two million cohabiting couples, which is expected to double by 2021. The increased rates of cohabitation display the decline in stigma attached to coitus outside of marriage – this is clearly shown by how in 1989, only 44% of answerers agreed with the statement ‘premarital sex is not wrong in itself’, however by 2000, this had increased to 62% (according to British Social Attitudes, 2000). This has likely been due to society being more likely to accept cohabitation, with 8% of 18-24 year olds believing it is “alright” for a couple to live together without the intention of marriage, whilst only 40% of those over 65 agreed (according to Social Trends 34, 2004).

Due to increased career opportunities for women, they have less need for the financial security of marriage and thus can choose to cohabit without any complications.

Secularisation also plays a part in cohabitation in that young individuals with no religion are more likely to cohabit in comparison to those without a religion (as reported by the 2001 Census).

It is worth noting that the distinction between marriage and cohabitation is not definitive as for some couples, cohabitation is but a step to marriage, as argued by Robert Chester (1985). This is delineated by Ernestina Coast (2006), whose research states that 75% of cohabitation couples expect to marry each other and see cohabitation as a period through which to determine if marriage is a viable option. In other cases, cohabitation is a temporary situation before marriage as one or both partners are awaiting a divorce.

On the contrary, André Bejin (1985) claims that cohabitation among some young couples reflects a conscious decision to construct a more negotiated and equal relationship than the traditional patriarchal marriage – Shelton and John (1993) found that cohabiting women do less housework in contrast to their married opposite. It is because of these different reasons that Eleanor Macklin (1980) postulates that the term ‘cohabitation’ is an umbrella term for a variety of partnerships, and that the relationship between cohabitation and marriage is an abstraction one.

There has been a significant increase in the number of divorces since the 1960s- this is supported by how the number of divorces doubled between 1961 and 1969, doubling again by 1972 – this ultimately peaked at 180,000 in 1993; the number in 2001 was 157,000, which is roughly six times higher than in 1961, meaning that about 40% of all marriages will end in divorce. Furthermore, roughly seven out of ten divorce applications now come from females, in stark contrast to the past where in 1946, 37% of the applications came from females, which is less than half of the modern day figure.

Five reasons have been identified for the increase in divorce: changes in the law; declining stigma/attitudes; secularisation; rising expectations of marriage; and changes in the position of women. In regards to the law, divorce was problematic to apply for in 19th century Britain, above all for women – this was before three key kinds of change were made in that the legal reasons for divorce were equalised for men and women (this took place in 1923) and was followed by a rise in the number of divorce applications. Additionally, in 1971, the reasons were widened to ‘irretrievable breakdown’, which resulted in a doubling of the divorce rate practically overnight. To add to this, legal aid for divorce was introduced in 1949, lowering the cost of divorcing. All in all, the rates rose with each change in the law.

In the past, divorce and divorcées were stigmatised, coupled with churches condemning divorce and often refusing to conduct marriage services with divorcees. As the stigma declines, divorce became more socially acceptable and as a result, couples are more likely...