

## **Socio-demographic predictors of divorce**

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## **Executive Summary**

- Research to date has found demographic factors to be more important than socio-economic factors in predicting divorce. Seemingly it is those factors which are more volitional, such as the timing and sequence of marriage and family formation, that are most important in predicting marital dissolution. However, the so-called fixed factors, such as social background of parents, may play a part in constraining behaviour and opportunities. For example, poor parental circumstances are related to poor educational achievement and an early age at marriage.
- The socio-demographic factors universally found to make divorce more likely are: an early age at marriage - especially teenage marriage; premarital births; premarital conceptions/short first birth intervals; premarital cohabitation (although this is linked to personal characteristics); previous cohabitation with someone else prior to marriage; previous partnership breakdown; parental divorce; and poor economic circumstances (unemployment/receipt of benefits/poor income).
- We suggest that these demographic factors may reflect other, as yet unmeasured, differences in individuals' behaviour and attitudes towards marriage and divorce. The sorts of data used in the studies reviewed tend not to allow us to look at these characteristics and hence to investigate the processes by which individuals in these higher-risk groups experience marital difficulties and ultimately marital dissolution.
- Further research is required to investigate the implications of current trends in these factors. It is unlikely, however, that the main characteristics identified here will change dramatically, although the magnitude of the risk factors will probably alter.
- Children whose parents are not legally married at the time of the birth are more likely to experience disruption than those born inside marriage. With the increasing proportion of children being brought up in cohabiting couple families, the overall proportions of children affected by union dissolution in their family are likely to rise.

- Earlier estimates of the risks of divorce in this country need to be updated since most of the evidence that includes people of all ages is based on data that are now two decades old.
- Further work is also needed to achieve a more sensitive demography of children's risks of family break-up. Only if children are followed in their own living arrangements will we be able to give exact estimates of their risk of experiencing family transitions.
- A more inter-disciplinary approach is required if we are to move beyond predicting a divorce outcome to explaining the pattern of events through which marriages arrive at different outcomes. This requires both a broader theoretical approach and the collection of more detailed longitudinal data.

## **Introduction**

The increase in divorce that has occurred in many Western countries forms part of a larger revolution in nuptiality and childbearing patterns that have collectively been termed the 'Second Demographic Transition' (Lesthaeghe 1991, Van de Kaa 1993). There are large differentials in the level of divorce across European countries with high rates observed in Northern European countries, including Britain, and much lower levels in Southern European countries. It is unclear whether these differences will persist, or whether they represent different stages of transition. It is important then to view the determinants of the rise in divorce in the context of other changes in partnership and family formation. Furthermore, as increasing numbers of couples choose to live together outside of marriage, official divorce registration statistics have increasingly become inadequate measures of partnership formation and dissolution. Analysis of the outcome of cohabiting partnerships is more complex than for marriage, however, because cohabiting partnerships can either translate into marriage, dissolve, or continue. For this reason in this paper we concentrate on the research evidence concerning only marital dissolution.

We first review trends in divorce in England and Wales and other developed countries over the last few decades, and then examine how increases in cohabitation might affect our notion of what constitutes partnership breakdown. Next we focus on marital unions and examine the existing literature to see whether there are socio-demographic characteristics that can identify individuals at high risk of marital breakdown. The final section will outline the policy implications, highlighting any characteristics revealed as identifying people most at risk of divorce, examining relevant socio-demographic trends in these, and noting outstanding research needs. By synthesizing the existing research evidence on predictors of divorce, we hope to establish a framework to aid the discussion of policies and practice directed towards reductions in the incidence of marital breakdown.



## **1. PATTERNS OF DIVORCE AND PARTNERSHIP DISSOLUTION**

### **1.1 Trends in divorce**

Marital dissolution is not a single event, but a process. Most commonly, however, statistics on the number of marriages which have broken down refer to the number of decrees absolute granted (and, in England and Wales, the much smaller number of marriages awarded a decree of nullity). There will of course be other marriages in difficulty, and couples who have separated but not undergone divorce proceedings. These facts should be borne in mind when interpreting trends in the numbers divorcing and in identifying the factors associated with marital dissolution. It is not necessarily the case that factors associated with marital dissolution are associated with marital quality. For example, marriage duration may be positively associated with marital stability but negatively associated with marital quality (Karney and Bradbury, 1995).

Figure 1 shows the trend in the crude divorce rate (the number of divorces per 1000 of the population) in some European countries and the United States. During the 1970s many developed countries witnessed a dramatic increase in divorce. Often these increases coincided with changes in divorce legislation. For example, in the UK the divorce rate increased rapidly following the 1969 Divorce Law Reform Act which came into effect in January 1971. The rate then levelled off during the early 1980s, increasing slightly after the implementation of the 1984 Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act, and stabilized during the 1990s at a level of about three divorces per 1000 population. Whilst the UK currently has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe, the level remains significantly lower than that seen in the United States. The level of divorce in Southern European countries has remained low, with divorce being made legal in Italy in 1971 only.

The crude divorce rate is a measure available for numerous countries. However, this measure is affected not only by the level of divorce in a population, but also by the age and marital status structure of the population - populations with a large proportion of married couples will have more individuals who are at risk of divorce. Data on a more specific measure of divorce - the

total period divorce rate - is available for some countries (Figure 2). This synthetic measure, which is affected by timing changes in divorce, tells us the proportion of marriages which would ultimately end in divorce if currently observed divorce rates remained constant in the future. So, for example, a continuation of 1995 divorce rates would mean that two in five marriages in England and Wales

**Figure 1. Crude Divorce Rate  
Selected Countries, 1960-1994**

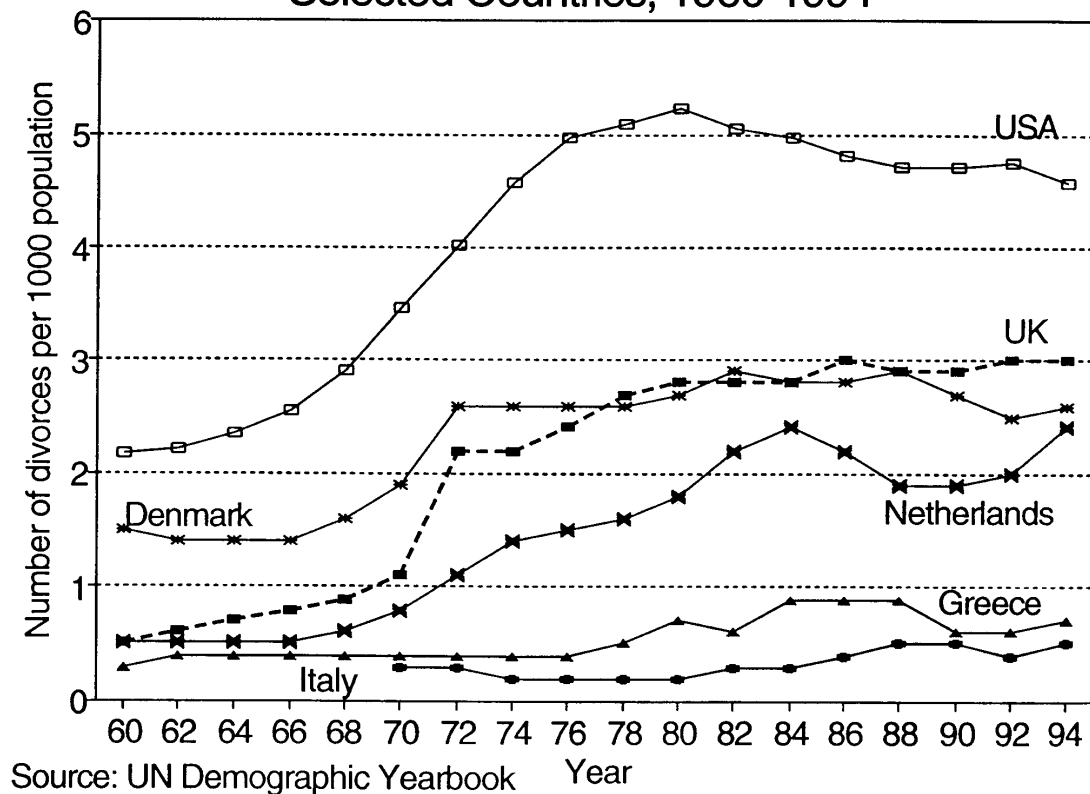
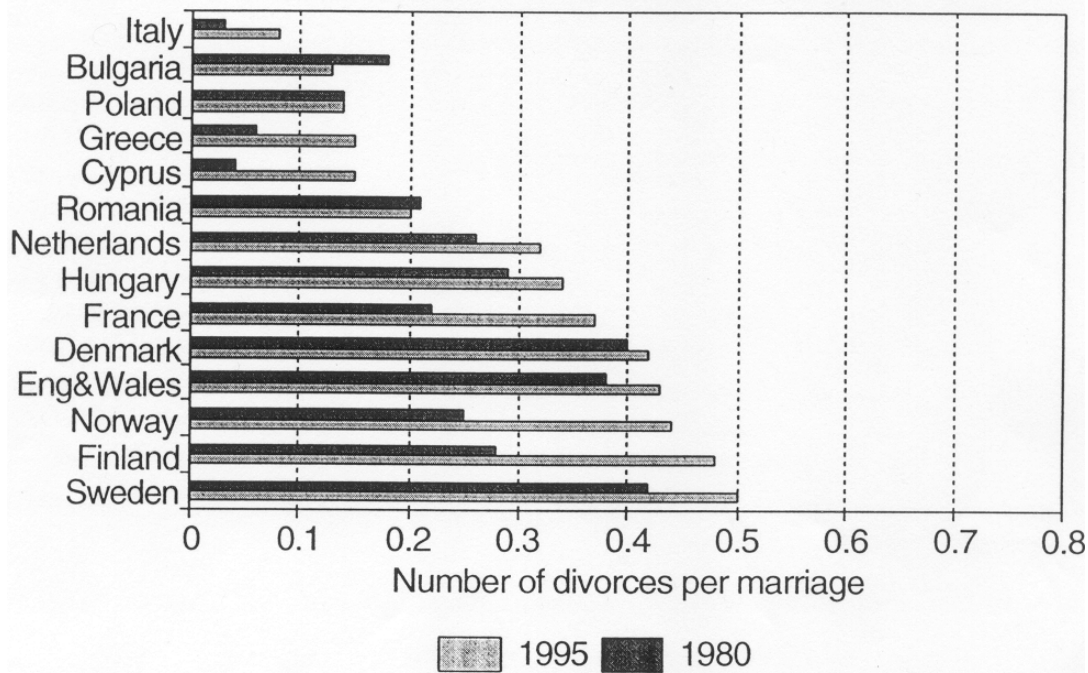


Figure 2. Total Period Divorce Rate  
Selected Countries, 1980 and 1995



Source: Council of Europe, 1997

would ultimately end in divorce (Haskey, 1996). We can see that England and Wales lies close to the Scandinavian countries in this measure. Between 1980 and 1995 the level of divorce in Finland and Norway converged towards the high rates seen in Denmark and Sweden. These levels are similar to those observed in Canada, but lower than those seen in the United States where the proportion of marriages ending in divorce reached 50% in the early 1970s (EUROSTAT, 1997). These countries can be distinguished from the other central and eastern European countries such as France, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Romania, where around a third of marriages are currently predicted to end in divorce, and are much higher than the rates observed in the Southern European countries such as Cyprus, Greece, and Italy.

In many developed countries divorce rates have increased most at younger ages, in concert with the trend for divorce to occur at increasingly short marriage durations (EUROSTAT, 1997). As shown in Table 1, for England and Wales around one per cent of the 1956 marriage cohort divorced during the first five years of marriage whereas the figures were four, ten, and thirteen

per cent for the 1966, 1976 and 1986 marriage cohorts (Haskey, 1996).

<b>Table 1: Cumulative proportions (per 1000) of marriages ended by divorce, by duration of marriage, for selected marriage cohorts 1956-86, England and Wales.</b>									
Marriage Cohort	Duration of marriage (completed years)								
	1	2	3	4	5	10	15	20	30
1956	0.2	0.7	3	8	13	44	72	114	167
1961	0.4	0.9	4	13	21	71	130	178	230
1966	0.6	1	7	22	39	124	189	237	
1971	0.9	2	23	49	71	166	229	275	
1976	2	4	40	76	104	203	269		
1981	2	4	47	86	116	228			
1986		16	43	73	104	133			
Source: Adapted from Haskey (1996), Table 1 p. 28.									

## **1.2 Children's experience of divorce**

Seen from a child's perspective, the family has become more diverse in structure and more prone to transition because of the increasing likelihood of being born outside marriage and of experiencing parental separation. The proportion of children who experienced the breakdown of their parents' marriage by age 16 increased by two and a half times in 20 years: from nine per cent of those born in 1960 to 20% of those born in 1979 (Haskey, 1997). The figure for current birth cohorts is likely to be over one in four: 28% according to Haskey's most recent calculations based on 1993/4 rates (Haskey, 1997). The proportion of children experiencing a 'conventional life-cycle' (parents married at the time of birth and staying married until the child is adult) was predicted to fall to around 50% (Clarke, 1992). Given the subsequent increases in childbearing outside marriage, the actual figure is likely to be much lower. It remains to be seen whether Britain will follow the trend seen in the United States where almost half of all children are expected to experience the divorce of their parents (Glick and Lin, 1986).

As will be discussed later from the adult's perspective, children whose parents are not legally married at the time of the birth experience more disruption than those born inside marriage (Clarke, Di Salvo, Joshi, and Wright, 1997). With an increasing proportion of children being brought up by cohabiting couples, the overall proportions of children who will be affected by union dissolution in their family are likely to be even higher than estimated above. The chances of family disruption are also higher for children born to teenage mothers, regardless of the type of birth registration: only just over one third of these children were living with both natural parents in 1991 (Clarke et al., 1997).

The trend towards shorter marriage durations at divorce has important implications for the number and age of children likely to be affected by the breakup of their parent's marriage. This in turn will affect the establishment of residence patterns post divorce, and future relations between any children and the non-resident parent.

## **1.3 Cohabitation as an alternative to marriage?**

The last twenty-five years have witnessed significant changes in nuptiality in all Western

countries, involving not only increases in marital dissolution but falling marriage rates. Increases in cohabitation during the 1970s and 1980s have partially, but not fully, offset this decline in marriage (Murphy, 1996). Premarital cohabitation is now a normal lifecourse stage in living arrangements in Britain; around 70% of spinsters marrying in the early 1990s cohabited with their future spouse prior to marriage, compared with just five per cent of those marrying during the mid-1960s (Haskey, 1995). It is less clear, however, whether cohabitation is becoming an alternative to marriage. Evidence from the 1958 British birth cohort suggests that cohabitation remains short lived. Of those whose first partnership was a cohabiting one at the start, almost two thirds had married their partner by age 33, 28% of the partnerships had broken down, and eight per cent were still intact (Berrington and Diamond, 1995). Increasingly, cohabiting couples are beginning family formation outside marriage. Currently one third of births take place outside marriage. Of these extra-marital births, over half (58%) are jointly registered by both parents living at the same address. Yet it would seem that many couples still go on to marry following the birth of a child outside marriage, since data from the 1996 General Household Survey suggest that only one in ten households containing dependent children are cohabiting couple families (Office for National Statistics, 1997). In Britain the emergence of cohabitation among never married individuals during the 1970s does not seem to have been confined to any specific social groups (Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993), although there is some suggestion that cohabiting couples with children are more socio-economically disadvantaged than their married contemporaries (Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993; Ermisch, 1995).

#### **1.4 The relative stability of cohabiting and marital partnerships**

An important consideration for this review is the extent to which (a) cohabiting partnerships are less stable than marriages, and (b) whether parental and lifecourse characteristics associated with the breakdown of cohabitation are similar to those for marriage. In fact surprisingly little is known about the stability of cohabiting partnerships in Britain, owing largely to the paucity of prospective or retrospective data on cohabiting relationships, a paucity which is beginning to be rectified. Preliminary analyses of the BHPS for recent birth cohorts suggest that cohabiting couples are between three and four times more likely to split up than their married counterparts, even when the age of the couple and the presence of children are taken into account (Buck and Ermisch, 1995). Similar findings have emerged from France (Leridon, 1990), the Netherlands (Manting, 1994), Norway (Jensen, 1997), Sweden (Hoem 1992) and the United States

(Teachman, Thomas, and Paasch, 1991).

Cohabiting couples are likely to differ from married couples in their characteristics (socio-economic and demographic amongst others), and these differences need to be taken into account when comparing the relative stability of marital and cohabiting partnerships (Murphy, 1995). That is to say, couples more likely to be at risk of separation may enter into cohabitation rather than marriage. However, on the basis of preliminary analyses for Britain (Buck and Ermisch, 1995; Ermisch and Francesconi, 1996), and findings from other developed countries, it seems unlikely that the increased propensity for cohabiting partnerships to breakdown will disappear completely once other background factors are controlled. In Norway, for example, cohabiting unions have a two to three times higher risk of breakdown than married unions even after controlling for many background characteristics (Jensen, 1997).

Evidence on the demographic and socio-economic factors affecting the outcome of cohabiting partnerships is even more sparse than data on their stability, especially for Britain. Preliminary work based on the 1958 cohort (Berrington and Diamond, 1995; Kiernan, 1997) and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) (Ermisch and Francesconi, 1996) has shown that age at partnership formation is likely to be an important predictor of cohabitation dissolution. Previous research in Canada (Wu, 1995) and the Netherlands (Manting, 1994) has highlighted the stabilizing influence that the presence of children brings to cohabiting partnerships. What is clear is that, increasingly, one-parent families are being formed by the dissolution of cohabiting partnerships. Ermisch (1995) estimates that, among women who have their first child within their first cohabiting partnership, around half can expect to become a never married lone mother through the dissolution of their current union within 10 years of the birth. The policy implications of these trends will be discussed in more detail in section three.

## **2. WHO DIVORCES?**

### **2.1 Theoretical frameworks for analysing determinants of divorce**

Four theoretical perspectives that have influenced research on marriage were evaluated by Karney and Bradbury (1995): social exchange theory, behavioural theory, attachment theory, and crisis theory. These different approaches reflect distinct research traditions within different

disciplines which have attempted to investigate the causes of marital dissolution. Most studies have tended to be essentially empirical, looking for predictors of divorce in the form of associations or correlations between certain characteristics and marital dissolution. Many studies utilize aspects of social exchange theory. In this tradition, Levinger (1965) argued that factors affecting the risk of marital breakdown can be classified according to whether they affect the **attractiveness** of the marriage, whether they act as **barriers** to marital dissolution, or whether they affect the **alternatives** to marriage. The presentation of direct relationships between the predictors and the likelihood of divorce can, however, be misleading. For example, the experience of parental divorce may affect marital outcomes through its effect on other variables, such as socialization in interpersonal behaviours (Amato, 1996), but such mediating variables are rarely examined in research studies. In general, most studies have not attempted to understand how any relationships between socio-demographic characteristics and marital stability operate, and how marriages become more or less stable.

The other three approaches concentrate on the **processes** through which marriages become less stable, focusing on such issues as marital interaction, aspects of each partner's relationship history and family of origin, or how couples cope with stressful events. Karney and Bradbury (1995) identify the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and conclude that no single framework satisfies all the criteria of a theory of marital development. They suggest a more integrated framework for future research, although few studies have attempted to combine all of these theoretical perspectives. One recent study by Amato (1996) has shown that given sufficiently detailed longitudinal data on married couples, it is possible to investigate the pathways through which socio-demographic factors affect marital dissolution. For example, this work has shown how the intergenerational transmission of divorce risk seems to work through increased interpersonal behaviour problems among those whose parents separated (such as lack of trust or inability to commit) which interfere with the maintenance of rewarding relationships (Amato, 1996).

## **2.2 Data and methods used in analyses of marital dissolution**

Most of the research reviewed below is based upon the analysis of large survey datasets in which the survivorship of marriages is examined according to various characteristics of the individual (and in a few cases the couple). Since the risk of marital dissolution is dependent upon the



length of time a couple have been married (and hence exposed to the risk of dissolution), it is necessary to employ techniques that allow for differences in marriage duration. The development of suitable multivariate techniques in the late 1970s meant that researchers could begin to examine the combined effects of a number of background factors on the risk of divorce. For example, the effect of social class can be examined while controlling for other related factors such as age at marriage and childbearing experience.

Thus, in reviewing previous research, it is important to distinguish between the **gross** relationship between a background variable and marital dissolution, in which only that single factor is considered, and the **net** relationship when other factors are held constant. When considered individually, some background characteristics such as social class may be associated with an increased risk of marital dissolution. However, this association may operate through an intermediate factor such as age at marriage. When age at marriage is included into the analysis, social class may no longer be significantly associated with the risk of marital dissolution. In this example we might argue that what is of real importance in affecting the risk of marital dissolution is age at marriage. Since individuals from poorer backgrounds tend to marry at younger ages, social class is associated indirectly with the risk of marital dissolution. As noted by Murphy (1985) referring to gross and net relationships, "Whilst neither result is 'correct', it does emphasize that rather different impressions may be obtained by incorporating different degrees of control" (Murphy, 1985 p. 459).

The 1980s witnessed an explosion in the number of multivariate analyses of the predictors of marital dissolution using larger and better datasets, most often from the United States (White, 1990). In Britain such techniques were first applied by Murphy (1985), using data from the 1976 Family Formation Survey and the 1980 General Household Survey. Recently this work has been extended using data from the 1958 British birth cohort (Berrington and Diamond, 1997; Kiernan, 1997; Kiernan and Mueller, forthcoming). These analyses estimate the increase in risk of marital dissolution associated with a particular background characteristic, holding other factors constant, and hence can identify which factors have the largest impact on the risk of dissolution. The most commonly used statistical technique (termed proportional hazards models, as used by Murphy (1985) and Bracher, Santow, Morgan, and Trussell (1993)) makes it possible to estimate the relative risk of breakdown for individuals with different background characteristics, compared to

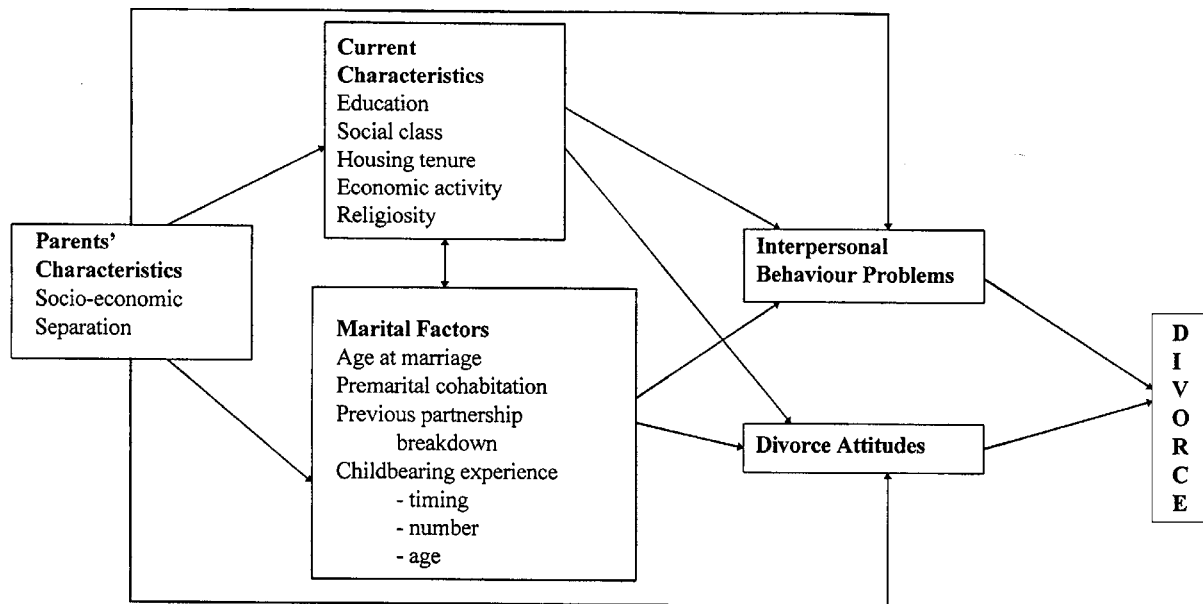
a baseline of 1. Thus a relative risk of 1.8 suggests that the probability of breakdown for individuals with this characteristic are increased by 80%. Recently, other methods (logistic hazards regression techniques - as in Berrington and Diamond (1997)) have been used because they allow researchers to explore the way in which the effect of background factors, such as age at marriage, vary over the duration of the marriage. These techniques also allow estimation of the increased risk of dissolution associated with a particular background characteristic, but express this increase in risk as the increase in the odds of experiencing dissolution. For example, an odds ratio of 1.3 means that the odds of experiencing marital dissolution are 30% higher in this group than for the baseline group.

In interpreting the findings of the studies reviewed below, it is important to bear in mind that the increase in the risk of marital dissolution estimated from each of the studies is specific to that study sample, locality, and time period. This is particularly pertinent given that much of the evidence is based on data from previous marriage cohorts, especially from the United States. In the review below we report only those factors which have been found in a number of different studies to be associated with the risk of divorce.

### **2.3 Lifecourse determinants of marital breakdown**

In the following section we review the socio-demographic factors previously found to be associated with the risk of marital dissolution. We will review the evidence by following a lifecourse approach as this is convenient for the consideration of policy interventions. Previous authors have also used this lifecourse approach to identify the temporal ordering of the effects of these factors on the risk of marital dissolution (see for example Hoem and Hoem, 1992; Bracher et al., 1993; Amato, 1996; Berrington and Diamond, 1997). As can be seen in Figure 3, the factors are placed in three groups: characteristics of the individual's parents, marital factors (demographic factors associated with the couples' partnership history and childbearing experience), and the individual's own socio-economic characteristics. Parental factors are fixed and outside an individual's control, whereas marital factors are very much the result of an individual's own behaviour (although it might be argued that an individual's choices in such matters as age at marriage and age at first birth are constrained by conventions operating through the family of origin and their own socio-economic circumstances). Socio-economic factors are likely to influence the risk of marital dissolution both directly and indirectly (through their effect

on marital factors). We suggest that socio-demographic factors can affect the risk of marital dissolution through their impact on a) interpersonal behaviour and b) the couple's attitudes towards divorce. Figure 3 is intended to highlight the complex relationships between the socio-demographic factors discussed below and the risk of divorce, and is not intended as a definitive description of all the potential factors influencing the risk of divorce. For example, factors external to the couple such as legislative changes in divorce law are not shown.



Adapted from Berrington and Diamond (1997)

Figure 3. Framework For Analysing Socio-Demographic Determinants Of Divorce

### 2.3.1 Parents' characteristics

#### *Parents' socio-economic status*

Adults from poorer socio-economic backgrounds have previously been found to experience higher rates of marital dissolution in Britain. This association tends to operate indirectly, however, through the tendency for individuals from poorer social backgrounds to marry at an early age, which, as we will discuss later, is a key predictor of marital dissolution (Kiernan, 1986; Berrington and Diamond, 1997). There is less evidence for any direct relationship, although in Sweden analyses of the 1981 Swedish fertility survey suggest that divorce was one third higher among women from higher and middle-level white collar backgrounds (Hoem and

Hoem, 1992; Trussell, Rodreguez, and Vaughan, 1992). Hoem and Hoem (1992) suggest that the bourgeois culture is more accepting of dissolution when a union does not function as desired. It is not clear whether these findings can be applied to Britain.

### ***Parental separation***

Evidence from the United States and Britain suggests that the risk of divorce is higher among those who experienced the dissolution of their parents' marriage. That is to say, there is an inter-generational transmission of divorce risk (Bumpass and Sweet, 1972; Pope and Mueller, 1976; Teachman, 1983; Glen and Kramer, 1987; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Bumpass, Castro Martin, and Sweet, 1991; Amato, 1996; Berrington and Diamond, 1997; Kiernan, 1997). It has been suggested that this is true even for children who are grown up when their parents divorce (Kiernan and Cherlin, forthcoming). Without controlling for other characteristics, the risk of marital dissolution among the 1958 British birth cohort was almost twice as high among men who had experienced a parental divorce during childhood than for those who had not, and 50% higher among women (Kiernan, 1997). Recent research from both the United States and Britain has highlighted the way in which this relationship is mediated through the association between parental separation and various intermediate factors including an early age at partnership formation, increased rates of premarital cohabitation, and premarital childbearing (Pope and Mueller, 1976; Glen and Kramer, 1987; Bumpass et al. 1991; Berrington and Diamond, 1997; Kiernan, 1997). Kiernan (1997), analysing data from the 1958 birth cohort, found that once these and other characteristics of those who had experienced parental separation had been controlled, men who experienced parental divorce were only 1.4 times more likely to experience marital dissolution. For women, the effect became insignificant when these other characteristics were included in the model.

A number of explanations have been put forward for the inter-generational transmission of divorce risk. Much attention has been focused on the lack of appropriate marital role models and reduced parental supervision of those whose parents separate. This "socialization hypothesis" suggests that reduced parental control results in children of divorced parents being more likely to enter into marriage at an early age, often as a consequence of a premarital conception. At the same time, children of divorced parents have less exposure to successful models of marital interaction and are seen to have reduced levels of marital interaction and communication. In

consequence these individuals may find marriage less attractive, and their ability to deal with marital stress may be jeopardized (Pope and Mueller, 1976; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Amato, 1996). Finally, experience of parental divorce may diminish commitment to marriage (Glenn and Kramer, 1987), and encourage more liberal attitudes to marital breakdown, thus providing lower barriers to dissolution (Thornton, 1991; Amato, 1996; Axinn and Thornton, 1996).

### **2.3.2 Marital factors**

Previous research has found the demographic characteristics of couples and the circumstances surrounding entry into marriage to be of prime importance in predicting divorce.

#### ***Age at marriage***

Age at marriage has consistently been found to be a good predictor of divorce in a variety of developed countries (White, 1990; Karney and Bradbury 1995). In general, teenage marriage has been found to incur additional risks. Divorce registration data from England and Wales show that, among spinsters marrying in 1984, 35% of teenage brides had divorced within ten years as compared with 22% of spinsters who married in their early twenties and 15% of those who married in their late twenties (Haskey, 1996). In general, the effect of age at marriage on the risk of divorce is reduced but still persists once other socio-economic characteristics of those marrying at young ages are taken into account. For example, Bracher et al. (1993) found that among Australian brides marrying between 1956 and 1986, the risk of divorce within 25 years of marriage among women marrying aged 20-29 was just two thirds of the risk for women marrying in their teens. However, once the background characteristics of those who married young were controlled, those who married in their twenties had three quarters of the risk of women marrying in their teens.

A number of explanations or possible mechanisms of operation have been postulated for this relationship, although, as noted by Booth and Edwards (1985) and South (1985), direct evidence in support of these explanations has been less forthcoming. Economic theorists argue that the higher rates of divorce result from insufficient time being spent in searching for an appropriate marriage partner, and point out that those who marry at an early age lack knowledge of the longer term characteristics of the future spouse (Becker, Landes, and Michael, 1977;

Oppenheimer, 1988). Others have highlighted the psycho-social mechanisms through which this link between young age at marriage and marital breakdown could operate. The emotional immaturity and lack of preparedness for marriage of those who marry in their teens are obvious candidates (Goode, 1966; Levinger, 1976).

There is some empirical evidence in support of the argument that couples marrying at young ages tend to have poor marital role performance (Booth and Edwards, 1985). Booth and Edwards (1985) suggest that this poor role performance results from a lack of adequate adult role models during adolescence. Bumpass and Sweet (1972) and Morgan and Rindfuss (1985) emphasize the degree of change most persons experience during their late teens and early twenties, suggesting that younger couples will have a greater risk of growing apart, for example, by developing different aspirations and interests. On the other hand, one might postulate that those marrying at a young age will have had less time to develop different interests prior to marriage.

Booth and Edwards (1985) suggest that those who marry at an early age are more likely to do so without the approval or support of family and friends. As a result the social pressures encouraging the couple to remain together will be weaker. Other authors have highlighted the greater opportunities available to young divorcees of meeting and being attractive to potential remarriage partners (Booth and Edwards, 1985; South, 1995). Finally, it has been suggested that the relationship between age at marriage and marital instability is partially spurious. Individuals who marry at young ages may have particular personality traits, such as an inclination to rash decision making or anti-social behaviour, which make them more inclined both to marry at a young age and to experience marital dissolution (Hoem and Hoem, 1992; South, 1995).

### ***Premarital cohabitation***

If cohabitation acts as a trial marriage, we would expect that couples who lived together prior to marriage would be at a lower risk of marital dissolution. The so-called "weeding hypothesis" argues that only those cohabiting couples who find themselves to be well suited and more committed to marriage go on to marry (Macklin, 1978; Teachman et al., 1991). However, in the last two decades evidence from a variety of developed countries, including Australia (Bracher et al., 1993), Britain (Haskey, 1992; Berrington and Diamond, 1997), Canada (Balakrishnan,

Vaninadha Rao, Lapierre-Adamcyk, and Krotki, 1987; Hall and Zhao, 1995), Germany (Hall, 1997); Sweden (Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom, 1988; Hoem and Hoem, 1992; Trussell et al., 1992) and the United States (DeMaris and Leslie, 1984; Bennett et al., 1988; Booth and Johnson, 1988; Axinn and Thornton, 1992; DeMaris and Rao, 1992; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993; Lillard, Brien, and Waite, 1995), suggests that couples who cohabit prior to marriage have a higher risk of marital dissolution. The actual increase in risk varies between different studies. In Britain, Haskey (1992) estimated that, for couples who married for the first time in the early 1980s, those couples who cohabited premaritally were 60% more likely to have divorced after eight years of marriage than couples who had married directly. These gross effects, which do not control for differences in the background characteristics of cohabiters and non-cohabiters, are similar to those estimated for the 1958 British birth cohort. By eight years of marriage, 23% of men and 23% of women who had cohabited premaritally had experienced marital dissolution, while the figures were 16% of men and 18% of women who had married directly (Berrington and Diamond, 1997).

Most researchers argue that the positive association between premarital cohabitation and increased risk of marital dissolution results from a 'selection effect' whereby those who cohabit before marriage possess other demographic and socio-economic characteristics which put them at a higher risk of marital dissolution (DeMaris and Leslie, 1984; Bennett et al., 1988; Booth and Johnson, 1988; Axinn and Thornton, 1992; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993; Hall and Zhao, 1995). In particular, couples who cohabit premaritally have been found to have less traditional attitudes towards family formation (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Thompson and Colella, 1992; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993) and a weaker commitment towards the institution of marriage (Bennett et al., 1988). Recent research from the United States suggests that couples who cohabit prior to marriage have higher marital expectations but lower levels of marital satisfaction, as measured by increased levels of marital disagreement and lower levels of marital interaction (Booth and Johnson 1988; Webster, Orbuch, and House, 1995; Brown and Booth, 1996).

Evidence from the 1958 British birth cohort lends support to this "selection hypothesis". Those who lived with their spouse prior to first marriage were less likely to have a religious affiliation, were more likely to have experienced parental separation, and were more likely to have experienced a premarital conception or birth (Berrington and Diamond, 1997). When these and

other background characteristics of premarital cohabiters were taken into account within a multivariate analysis, the effect of premarital cohabitation persisted but was only minor in magnitude. As the authors note, it is unclear whether, if it were possible to control fully for differences in the characteristics of couples who chose to cohabit or to marry directly, this effect would disappear altogether.

A growing body of evidence from the United States, on the other hand, suggests that the experience of cohabitation may itself have an independent effect on premarital cohabitation (Booth and Johnson, 1988; Thompson and Colella, 1991; Axinn and Thornton, 1992). Previous analyses of detailed multi-wave panel data from the United States suggest that the experience of premarital cohabitation does in fact increase young adults' acceptance of divorce (Axinn and Thornton, 1992).

It would seem then that any protective effect that cohabitation has in acting as a weeding mechanism is being outweighed by a selection effect, and also possibly by the effect of cohabitation itself on the individual's attitudes towards marriage.

### ***Previous experience of partnership dissolution***

Rates of divorce have been found to be higher for couples in which one or both have been married previously, reflecting the propensity of certain individuals to be more likely to experience divorce. For individuals married in Britain before 1961, the ratio was about two to one, whereas for more recent marriage cohorts it has varied between about two to one and three to two (Haskey, 1996). Bracher et al. (1993) propose that having been married before indicates a lack of skill either in selecting a compatible partner or in staying married. Levinger (1976) suggests that previously divorced persons are more likely to view separation as a solution to conflict, or to be members of groups that find divorce more acceptable. Haskey (1987) suggests that the pattern reflects a familiarity with the divorce process, while Bracher et al. suggest that these marriages suffer strains imposed by lingering emotional or financial after-effects of the old one (Bracher et al, 1993).

Increasingly, men and women are entering first marriage after having previously experienced a



cohabiting partnership with someone else which broke down. Studies from the United States and Britain have also found higher rates of divorce among those who experienced a cohabiting partnership prior to first marriage (Teachman and Polonko, 1990; Bumpass et al., 1991; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993; Lillard, 1995; Berrington and Diamond, 1997). This increase in divorce risk persists when other characteristics of those who cohabited in another partnership prior to marriage (for example, higher levels of premarital childbearing and less traditional attitudes towards marriage and divorce) are taken account of (Berrington and Diamond, 1997).

### ***Childbearing experience***

#### *Number of children*

Research in Britain (Murphy, 1985; Kiernan, 1986; Berrington and Diamond, 1997), Canada (Hall and Zhao, 1995), Sweden (Andersson, 1997), and the United States (Bumpass and Sweet, 1972; Cherlin, 1977; Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Waite, Haggstrom, and Kanouse, 1985; Lillard et al., 1995; South, 1995) suggests that divorce is more common among childless couples; on the other hand, analyses of the 1981 Swedish Fertility Survey suggest the opposite (Trussell et al., 1992). Two causal mechanisms are likely to be operating. Couples are likely to stay together for the "sake of the children". At the same time, couples who are unsure about their marriage may put off childbearing (Becker et al., 1977). The recent increase in the level of voluntary childlessness in many developed countries has prompted researchers to investigate whether the risk of marital disruption associated with childlessness is lower among more recent birth cohorts, especially among those who delay marriage to a later age (Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Waite et al., 1985). No data are available for Britain which would allow the distinction to be made between couples who remain childless voluntarily and those who are involuntarily childless. Analyses of the 1958 birth cohort found no increase in the risk of marital dissolution among childless men and women who married in their teens, when compared with childless couples who married at later ages (Berrington and Diamond, 1997).

Data from Britain (Murphy, 1985), Sweden (Andersson, 1997) and the United States (Becker et al., 1977) suggest more of a U-shaped relationship between family size and the risk of divorce: couples with three or more children have higher divorce risks than those with two children. In part the higher levels of dissolution among couples with larger family sizes can be partially explained by the association between early (and premarital) childbearing and larger completed

family sizes (Murphy, 1985).

### *Age of Children*

Evidence from Australia (Bracher et al., 1993), France (Toulemon, 1994), Sweden (Andersson, 1997) and the United States (Becker et al., 1977; Cherlin, 1977), suggests that the age of children within the family can have an independent effect on the risk of divorce. The data suggest that younger children having a particularly stabilizing influence upon marriage. Waite et al. (1985), using data from the United States, found that a first birth significantly decreased the risk of marital dissolution for the subsequent two years.

### *Timing of childbearing*

The association between premarital conception and subsequent marital instability has long been recognized (see for example Furstenberg (1976) and Becker et al. (1977) for early analyses of United States data). Once other factors are taken account of, the risk of marital breakdown for women married before 1976 in Britain was found to be 91% higher among brides with a premarital conception (Murphy, 1985). For Canadian women marrying in the late 1960s and 1970s, those with a premarital conception were 50% more likely to experience dissolution, although earlier analyses of United States data found no significant increase in divorce risk associated with premarital conception (Teachman, 1983).

If premarital conceptions indicate a short courtship and lack of partner search, we might expect the increase in the risk of marital dissolution associated with a premarital conception to be greater during the early years of marriage (Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Hoem and Hoem, 1992). However, no evidence for this pattern was found among the marriages of the 1958 British birth cohort analyzed by Berrington and Diamond (1997). For more recent cohorts, we expect premarital conceptions to be increasingly associated with premarital cohabitation, thus changing the relationship between premarital conception and marriage breakdown.

Those who marry after the birth of their first child have been found to be at a particularly high risk of divorce in Australia (Bracher et al., 1993), Britain (Murphy, 1985; Berrington and Diamond, 1997), Canada (Balakrishnan et al., 1987), Sweden (Andersson, 1997) and the United States (Bumpass and Sweet, 1972; Menken, Trussell, Stempel, and Babakol, 1981; Teachman,

1983; Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Teachman and Polonko, 1990). For example, once other factors are held constant, around 20% of women born in Britain in 1958 who experienced their first birth prior to marriage are estimated to experience marital dissolution within eight years whereas the figure is 13% of those who delay their childbearing for a couple of years after marriage (Berrington and Diamond, 1997). A number of explanations have been put forward. Some authors argue that the experience of lone motherhood will encourage less traditional attitudes towards marriage and divorce (Teachman, 1983; Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985), while others suggest that the presence of a child may reduce a woman's ability to search for an appropriate partner, and her attractiveness to potential partners (Becker et al., 1977). It is unclear how these proposed influences would withstand changes in the acceptability of births outside marriage and single motherhood.

### **2.3.3 Individuals' current characteristics**

It is obvious that the stability of a marriage will be affected by the characteristics of both partners. However, survey data commonly refer to just one individual, and detailed information on the characteristics of the previous spouse is often lacking. Since an individual's characteristics are likely to change over time, we ideally need longitudinal data on level of education, economic activity, occupation, housing and so on. Because such characteristics are usually only measured at the time of the survey, few studies have been able to look at how changes in these circumstances, (for example, the wife returning to paid work following childbearing) affect marital stability.

An individual's current circumstances are likely to be the outcome of family background factors, (such as parental social class), together with influences external to the couple (such as the local job market). Socio-economic characteristics will affect the risk of dissolution directly and indirectly through their impact on marital factors. For example, level of education may affect the risk of dissolution through its effect on attitudes towards traditional family norms, but will be associated indirectly with divorce through the relationship between lower levels of education and young age at marriage.

### ***Socio-economic status***

### *Education*

Previous research has found inconsistent evidence of the effect of education on the risk of marital dissolution. A number of studies from the United States have suggested that the risk of divorce is significantly higher among those with lower levels of education (Menken et al., 1981; Teachman and Polonko, 1990; Bumpass et al., 1991; Trussell et al., 1992; Greenstein, 1995; South, 1995). Other studies, based on Canadian data (Balakrishnan et al., 1987) and Australian data (Bracher et al., 1993), find little difference in the risk of marital dissolution according to educational attainment, whilst Hall and Zhao (1989), using Canadian data, find education to be negatively associated with marital stability. Analyses of the 1958 birth cohort suggest that, in Britain, divorce is more common among those with lower levels of education, but that the relationship between education and marital dissolution is mediated through age at marriage. When age at marriage is controlled, the risk of divorce is similar across educational groups (Berrington and Diamond, 1997; Kiernan and Mueller, forthcoming).

Blossfeld, De Rose, Hoem, and Rohwer (1993) argue that the relationship between education and the propensity to divorce will change over time and between countries. These authors find that education is positively associated with divorce in countries such as Italy where the overall level of divorce is low, but that education is negatively associated with divorce in countries where divorce is more common. Blossfeld et al. (1993) suggest that, in countries such as Italy with more traditional family settings, educated women may have more liberal views on marriage and divorce and will be better able to cope with the social and economic consequences of divorce.

### *Economic circumstances*

British researchers tend to use social class and housing tenure as measures of socio-economic status, whilst researchers in other countries use the husband's income or his employment/unemployment to measure relative economic deprivation. Below we summarize some of the key findings of previous work in this area.

Whilst some studies in the United States found the risk of marital dissolution to be higher among couples with lower incomes (South, 1995), other American studies have found no relationship

between the husband's income and the risk of divorce (Greenstein, 1995; Amato, 1996). Analyses of data from Australia suggest that the husband's unemployment is significantly related to marital dissolution (Bracher et al., 1993), whilst in Britain unemployment has been found to have rather more complex associations with an increased risk of marital dissolution. Analysis of the BHPS has found that, among married or cohabiting couples, the economically disadvantaged couples (receiving benefits, unemployed) were more likely to separate than were those couples who were not so economically disadvantaged (Kiernan and Mueller, forthcoming). Lampard (1994), analysing data for men and women living in a number of urban centres in Britain, found that divorce was more likely among those who had experienced unemployment prior to marriage, but that unemployment during the marriage was significantly associated with an increased risk of divorce only for those who had never been premaritally unemployed. Job insecurity at marriage was also associated with an increased risk of dissolution. Lampard (1994) suggests that unemployment and marital instability may both reflect other unmeasured characteristics of the individual.

Early research in Britain suggested that the risk of divorce was higher among lower social classes, particularly when the husband was in an unskilled manual occupation (Gibson, 1974; Haskey, 1984, 1987), although Thornes and Collard (1979) found an increased risk among junior non-manual workers. More recent research in Britain, based on multivariate analyses of survey data, suggest that, once age at marriage and childbearing experience have been taken into account, social class differentials in the propensity to experience marital dissolution are relatively small (Murphy, 1985; Berrington and Diamond, 1997). A number of researchers have suggested that particular occupational groups, such as police officers and those in the armed forces, who work unsocial hours or who have particularly stressful jobs might be particularly prone to divorce (Noble, 1970; Murphy, 1985; Lampard, 1994).

#### *Women's employment in paid work*

It has been suggested that increased labour force participation among women may operate in several ways to make marriage less stable. Economic theorists argue that women's economic independence reduces the advantages of marriage for women (where marriage is perceived as the context within which the sexual division of labour takes place) (Becker et al., 1977). Whilst financial independence may reduce their willingness to remain in unsatisfactory marriages,

participation in the workforce may be associated with increased opportunities for meeting new partners (Bracher et al., 1993). Other authors argue that the employment of women outside the home takes the wife away from traditional homemaking responsibilities, and that the possible effects of this are increasing stress and conflict within the marriage (Greenstein, 1995).

At a country level, there does seem to be a correlation between the number of women in the workforce and the level of divorce. For example, in the United States, female participation in the work force is very high as is the divorce rate, whereas both the level of female participation and divorce are low in Southern European countries (Ermisch, 1996). However, this association does not denote a causal effect, and direct evidence about the effect of female employment on the risk of marital dissolution among individual couples is harder to find. As noted by White (1990), evidence from the United States on the effect of women's employment on the risk of divorce is equivocal. Spitze and South (1985) and Greenstein (1995) found that the number of hours worked by the wife was significantly related to the probability of divorce. Other studies in the United States have found the wife's employment to be unrelated to the risk of divorce (Amato, 1996). Greenstein (1995) found that the effect of the wife's employment on the risk of dissolution was most apparent for women with less traditional attitudes towards family roles, whilst Spitze and South (1985) found that the effect was strongest for childless women, women with pre-school age children, and for women who perceived that their husband disapproved of their employment.

Bracher et al. (1993) also find a strong relationship between the wife's labour force participation and marital breakdown in Australia. Interestingly, the effect for full-time work declined for recent marriage cohorts among whom women's employment became the norm. The effect of part-time work has not declined over time, however, which the authors suggest may reflect contradictions between the husband and wife in how they perceive the woman's role in domestic and paid work. Recent analyses of Canadian data also suggest that women who worked outside the home for all of their married life were significantly more likely to divorce, but that, as seen in Australia, the effect was insignificant for couples who had married since 1970 (Hou and Omwanda, 1997). Ermisch (1991) analyzed the risk of divorce among British mothers according to the number of months they had spent in paid employment since becoming a mother. Mothers who had been employed 80% of the time since childbirth experienced roughly double the

divorce risk of those who did not work following childbirth. However, as noted by Ermisch (1996), any relationship between women's employment and the propensity to divorce is not likely to be uni-directional. Whilst women who work outside the home may have greater economic autonomy and might be more willing to consider divorce, women who are contemplating divorce may be more likely to engage in paid work.

### ***Housing tenure***

Economic theory views home ownership as a "marital-specific asset" and hence predicts that couples who own their home would be less likely to divorce. The empirical evidence from Australia (Bracher et al., 1993), Britain (Kiernan, 1986; Murphy, 1985) and the United States (South, 1995) suggests that owner occupiers are indeed less likely to experience marital dissolution than those living in private rented accommodation. In Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, starting married life in the privately rented sector, as opposed to the owner-occupier sector, was seen to increase the risk of divorce by two thirds, with those starting life in local authority housing having intermediate risks (Murphy, 1985). As noted by Bracher et al. (1993) the causal mechanisms through which this association operates are not clear. Home ownership may increase marital stability either by increasing the rewards to the marriage, or by creating financial or emotional barriers to later disruption. Couples who are experiencing marital difficulties may hesitate to make such a financial commitment. Thus "rather than creating marital stability, purchasing a home may be evidence that it already exists" (Bracher et al., 1993, p. 421).

Given the changes in the housing market in Britain over the last two decades, it would be interesting to know whether a similar pattern would be seen for more recent marriage cohorts.

### ***Religiosity***

British research has shown higher levels of marital dissolution among marriages legalized in civil as opposed to religious ceremonies (Murphy, 1985; Haskey, 1987). Religious practice has also been found to be strongly associated with a reduced level of marital breakdown in Australia (Bracher et al., 1993), Britain (Thornes and Collard, 1979; Berrington and Diamond, 1997), Canada (Balakrishnan et al., 1987) and the United States (Teachman, 1983; Bumpass et al., 1991). It seems likely that those who are religiously active will hold more traditional attitudes

towards marriage and divorce.

### ***Behavioural and emotional problems***

Most of the socio-demographic determinants described thus far define particular socio-economic groups. As noted by Murphy (1985), the sorts of data available within large sample surveys usually under-estimate the importance of individual personality factors that are likely to be important predictors of divorce. Although these are not strictly within the remit of this review, it would be misleading not to mention the main findings in this area by demographers analysing large national datasets.

Any personality traits that are found to be associated with the risk of divorce are likely to operate through differences in marital behaviour as mentioned in Section 2.1, for example in the individual's ability to resolve conflicts. Prospective studies provide some data with which such psychological factors can be explored. Kiernan (1986), investigating the determinants of divorce among teenage brides born in Britain in 1946, found that neuroticism was the most consistent predictor of marital instability. More recently, analyses of the 1958 cohort have confirmed that individuals with pre-existing emotional and behavioural difficulties (as measured at age 16) are at a higher risk of marital dissolution (Berrington and Diamond, 1997; Kiernan and Mueller, forthcoming). According to Berrington and Diamond (1997) a gender difference is observable: young men identified as having an 'emotional' disorder at age 16 were found to be at an increased risk of marital breakdown, whereas among women it was those with a 'conduct' disorder who were found to be at increased risk. Most recently, a finding from the BHPS is that lower psychological well-being is associated with divorce in the ensuing few years (Kiernan and Mueller, forthcoming). These findings confirm the association between psychic factors and divorce and suggest the possibility of selection effects and emotional problems preceding divorce, being implicated in the findings of low post-divorce mental well-being.

## **2.4 Summary**

In summary, previous research has found demographic factors to be more important than socio-economic factors in predicting divorce. The conclusion of Murphy in the mid-1980s still holds 'For marital breakdown, it would appear that the answer lies not in our social class (nor our



background) but in ourselves' (Murphy, 1985 p. 460). Seemingly it is those factors that are more volitional, such as the timing and sequence of marriage and family formation, which are most important in predicting marital dissolution. Forming a partnership at an early age, cohabiting, and experiencing parental divorce are all associated with a higher risk of marital dissolution. These demographic factors may reflect other, as yet unmeasured, differences in individuals' behavioural or psychological factors and attitudes towards marriage and divorce. Kiernan and Mueller (forthcoming) argue that it is those who are economically, somatically and emotionally vulnerable who have the highest risks of divorce.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **3.1 Future socio-demographic trends**

The demography of partnerships has witnessed dramatic change in the last 25 years. It is highly unlikely that family life will revert to the stable nuclear pattern that existed for the short time following the Second World War. It is likely that the future will witness higher proportions of children experiencing the separation of their parents, following either the dissolution of marriage or cohabitation. Whether relationship formation and dissolution are the subject of public or only private concern should be considered carefully (Smart, 1997). In this country the State has traditionally been cautious about its role in relationship matters.

Using a lifecourse perspective we have highlighted the chronology of possible influences on divorce and identified specific socio-demographic characteristics that indicate a high risk for divorce. In this way we are able to identify certain groups of people or families as likely to be in particular need of support. However, as the literature reviewed above reveals, little is known about the processes through which these high-risk groups experience their marital problems. Clearly much more needs to be known if an understanding of those processes is to be useful to policy.

The results of our review suggest that the intermediate demographic factors are the strongest predictors of divorce - age at marriage, premarital childbearing and premarital conceptions, premarital cohabitation, and previous marital history - although family background does exert

some influence, perhaps by the constraints it imposes on individuals. For example, social class and age at marriage are highly correlated.

Targeting guidance and support towards couples who marry at an early age, those who have children early on in the marriage, and those who have already experienced partnership breakdown would seem a logical implication of our conclusions. We must be aware, however, of the possibility that these demographic factors are related to other facets of life, such as the emotional and psychological characteristics of the individual, the amount or type of stress experienced, or even a biological predisposition to handle stress in a certain manner - factors we have little information about. It may be the case that the demographic characteristics tend to identify vulnerable individuals who, under given stresses, are more likely to divorce. The relationship between age at marriage and divorce may not, therefore, be a causal one.

The socio-demographic characteristics identified in analyses to date may be of limited value for predicting the future risk of divorce. Research evidence that is now available is based on marriages that were contracted in the past. The changes in attitudes and behaviour of more recent cohorts may result in other risk characteristics being more pertinent. It is unlikely, however, that the main risk factors identified here will change dramatically, although the magnitude of the increase in risk will probably alter. Age at marriage is likely to remain a key factor associated with increased risks of dissolution. This probably holds, also, for age at cohabitation. The median age at marriage has been increasing throughout the last two decades, from a low in the late 1960s of 21.4 years for women and 23.6 years for men. Women who continue to marry in their teens will continue to have a higher risk of relationship breakdown but this should be a shrinking proportion of women.

Of particular importance is the changing partnership context within which conceptions and births prior to marriage now occur. The separation of marriage and childbearing, which took place in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, is reflected in the fact that over one third of all births now occur outside marriage. Traditionally, premarital conceptions were viewed as indicating hastily arranged "shot gun marriages". Increasingly, such conceptions take place within cohabiting partnerships, so that it is no longer obvious that a premarital conception denotes a short courtship. In fact, a shrinking proportion of couples who experience an extra-marital conception

marry before the birth of the child - down from twenty-one per cent in 1979 to nine per cent in 1994. The evidence from this review suggests that this increase in childbearing before marriage will have negative implications for the stability of marital unions.

Cohabitation has now become the norm before marriage and appears to be replacing it for some couples. The apparently greater propensity of cohabiting as opposed to married partnerships to break down, and to do so at an earlier duration, has implications for the children of such partnerships (Jensen, 1997). It is, therefore, important to distinguish between these two types of unions. Marriage is a public ceremony and statement of commitment with known and legally defined rights and responsibilities. This is not the case for informal unions. The legal implications both for children and adults are frequently unknown to people in cohabiting unions (McRae, 1993). It is often only when such unions break down that the partners realize their legal position, which may be problematic for fathers and children since cohabiting fathers do not automatically have rights in regard to their children born in a cohabiting union (Burghes, Clarke, and Cronin, 1997).

This review has highlighted the importance of the partners' previous relationship history in influencing the risk of divorce. Those who have already experienced one partnership breakdown have a higher risk of experiencing the dissolution of a subsequent partnership. It seems clear that increases in cohabitation among never married individuals will result in increasing proportions of individuals beginning marriage after having already experienced the breakdown of one or more previous co-residential unions. Further work is required to investigate the implications of these trends.

### **3.2 Future research priorities**

Concluding their review of American longitudinal studies of marriage, Karney and Bradbury (1995) note that 'there remains a strong need for longitudinal research on marriage, but there is a need for longitudinal theory to guide this research'. To this end they outline a number of research priorities, most of which we support: documenting marital quality over time; using homogeneous samples (recruiting a sample at the same stage of marital development); using complete longitudinal designs (as the predictor variables themselves may change over time);

incorporating cross-sectional and retrospective data (in order to study age, period, and duration effects); studying transition to marriage (pathways into marriage may be as important as factors after the wedding); examining nonmarital outcomes (eg health, depression, children's adjustment); and focusing on broad theoretical bases (not only to predict divorce risk but to explain the processes). We would firmly endorse this last proposal.

It is only if a focus broader than that of pure demographic or economic analysis is adopted that the emphasis can shift from predicting divorce to explaining the pattern of events through which marriages arrive at different outcomes. This requires both more collaborative and interdisciplinary research and the employment of different methods. Currently we do not have the data that would allow us to answer many of the most important questions and hence provide the evidence required to formulate the best policies and practice for intervening in the divorce process.

More narrowly, the analysis of divorce risks in this country needs to be updated because most of the available evidence on people of all ages is based on data that are now two decades old. Relationship and childbearing patterns, as well as the nature of women's employment, have changed in the last 25 years and it is essential to establish the effects of these developments on the risks of dissolution. It is necessary, also, to examine whether cohabiting partnerships are less stable than marriages once other factors are controlled. To this end, repeated panel data are needed in order to investigate whether there are increased propensities for partnerships which began as cohabitation to break down and, if so, whether this is due to the experience of cohabitation itself. Does cohabitation change people's attitudes towards marriage or divorce? Is it easier for individuals to leave a cohabiting partnership? We need to examine the increase in cohabitation in terms of consequences for relationship stability and the implications for children.

Much of the research reviewed above identifies the socio-economic characteristics that individuals bring to a marriage. Less is known about the impact of life events during the marriage, such as experience of unemployment. More detailed inter-disciplinary data following couples over time are required if we are to identify such associations. Also, further work is needed if a more sensitive demography of children's risks of family breakup is to be achieved.

Longitudinal data from cohort studies, panel data, and linked data are available only for adults. Only if children are followed through their own living arrangements will we be able to give exact estimates of their risk of experiencing family transitions. This would be the first step in an assessment of children's family lives that could assist the development of policies to safeguard their future well-being.

In this review we have highlighted the characteristics of those most at risk of experiencing marital disruption. We have identified a number of research gaps that need to be filled, but have also highlighted some findings which are of relevance to current policy. Further work is required to investigate whether the relative importance of these socio-economic risk factors has changed for more recent marriage cohorts given that the relationships between cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing are changing rapidly. Finally, an explanation of the processes involved in partnership breakdown is vital. This can only be achieved by a broader theoretical basis, one that encompasses psychological, social and economic determinants, as well as demographic factors

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## **SYNOPSIS**

This paper is one set of seven reviews of evidence, from the United Kingdom and overseas, on the causes of marital breakdown and the effectiveness of policies and services intended to reduce its incidence. In this paper evidence on the socio-demographic predictors of divorce is considered. Also taken into account is the influence of cohabitation on partnership breakdown. The research evidence shows that early marriage, premarital childbearing, and previous partnership breakdown are among the most important of the demographic factors predicting marital breakdown. Further research, of an interdisciplinary kind, is required to identify links between these demographic factors and psychological, social, and economic factors.