11.5: Changes and Issues Affecting American Families

Learning Objectives

- Discuss why the U.S. divorce rate rose during the 1960s and 1970s and summarize the major individual-level factors accounting for divorce today.
- Describe the effects of divorce for spouses and children.
- Summarize the evidence on how children fare when their mothers work outside the home.
- Discuss how children of same-sex couples fare compared to children of heterosexual couples.
- Discuss evidence concerning the continuing debate over the absence of fathers in many African American families.

American families have undergone some important changes since the 1950s. Scholars, politicians, and the public have strong and often conflicting views on the reasons for these changes and on their consequences. We now look at some of the most important changes and issues affecting U.S. families.

Cohabitation

Some people who are not currently married nonetheless cohabit, or live together with someone of the opposite sex in a romantic relationship. The census reports that almost 7 million opposite-sex couples are currently cohabiting; these couples constitute about 10% of all opposite-sex couples (married plus unmarried). The average cohabitation lasts less than 2 years and ends when the couple either splits up or gets married; about half of cohabiting couples do marry, and half split up. More than half of people in their 20s and 30s have cohabited, and roughly one-fourth of this age group is currently cohabiting (Brown, 2005).

Brown, S. I. (2005). How cohabitation is reshaping American families. *Contexts*, *4*(3), 33–37. Roughly 55% of cohabiting couples have no biological children; about 45% live with a biological child of one of the partners; and 21% live with their own biological child. (These figures add to more than 100% because many couples live with their own child and a child of just one of the partners.) About 5% of children live with biological parents who are...
Interestingly, married couples who have cohabited with each other before getting married are more likely to divorce than married couples who did not cohabit. As Susan I. Brown (2005, p. 34) Brown, S. I. (2005). How cohabitation is reshaping American families. Contexts, 4(3), 33–37. notes, this apparent consequence is ironic: “The primary reason people cohabit is to test their relationship’s viability for marriage. Sorting out bad relationships through cohabitation is how many people think they can avoid divorce. Yet living together before marriage actually increases a couple’s risk of divorce.” Two possible reasons may account for this result. First, cohabitation may change the relationship between a couple and increase the chance they will divorce if they get married anyway. Second, individuals who are willing to live together without being married may not be very committed to the idea of marriage and thus may be more willing to divorce if they are unhappy in their eventual marriage.

Recent work has begun to compare the psychological well-being of cohabiting and married adults and also the behavior of children whose biological parent or parents are cohabiting rather than married (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Brown, 2005). Apel, R., & Kaukinen, C. (2008). On the relationship between family structure and antisocial behavior: Parental cohabitation and blended households. Criminology, 46(1), 35–70; Brown, S. I. (2005). How cohabitation is reshaping American families. Contexts, 4(3), 33–37. On average, married adults are happier and otherwise have greater psychological well-being than cohabiting adults, while the latter, in turn, fare better psychologically than adults not living with anyone. Research has not yet clarified the reasons for these differences, but it seems that people with the greatest psychological and economic well-being are most likely to marry. If this is true, it is not the state of being married per se that accounts for the difference in well-being between married and cohabiting couples, but rather the extent of well-being that affects decisions to marry or not marry. Another difference between cohabitation and marriage concerns relationship violence. Among young adults (ages 18–28), this type of violence is more common among cohabiting couples than among married or dating couples. The reasons for this difference remain unknown but may again reflect differences in the types of people who choose to cohabit (Brown & Bulanda, 2008). Brown, S. L., & Bulanda, J. R. (2008). Relationship violence in young adulthood: A comparison of daters, cohabiters, and marrieds. Social Science Research, 37(1), 73–87.

The children of cohabiting parents exhibit lower well-being of various types than those of married parents: they are more likely to engage in delinquency and other antisocial behavior, and they have lower academic performance and worse emotional adjustment. The reasons for these differences remain to be clarified but may again stem from the types of people who choose to cohabit rather than marry.

Divorce and Single-Parent Households

The U.S. divorce rate has risen since the early 1900s, with several peaks and valleys, and is now the highest in the industrial world. It rose sharply during the Great Depression and World War II, probably because of the economic distress of the former and the family disruption caused by the latter, and fell sharply after the war as the economy thrived and as marriage and family were proclaimed as patriotic ideals. It dropped a bit more during the 1950s before rising sharply through the 1960s and 1970s (Cherlin, 2009a) Cherlin, A. J. (2009a). The marriage-go-round: The state of marriage and the family in America today. New York, NY: Knopf. (see Figure 11.9 “Number of Divorces per 1,000 Married Women Age 15 or Older, 1960–2009†). The divorce rate has since declined somewhat and today is only slightly higher than its peak at the end of World War II. Still, the best estimates say that 40%–50% of all new marriages will one
day end in divorce (Teachman, 2008). Teachman, J. (2008). Complex life course patterns and the risk of divorce in second marriages. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 70*(2), 294–305. The surprising announcement in June 2010 of the separation of former vice president Al Gore and his wife, Tipper, was a poignant reminder that divorce is a common outcome of many marriages.

**Figure 11.9 Number of Divorces per 1,000 Married Women Age 15 or Older, 1960–2009**

![Graph showing number of divorces per 1,000 married women from 1960 to 2009.](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_(Barkan)/11%3A_The_Family/11.05%3A_Change...)


### Reasons for Divorce

We cannot be certain about why the divorce rate rose so much during the 1960s and 1970s, but we can rule out two oft-cited causes. First, there is little reason to believe that marriages became any less happy during this period. We do not have good data to compare marriages then and now, but the best guess is that marital satisfaction did not decline after the 1950s ended. What did change was that people after the 1950s became more willing to seek divorces in marriages that were already unhappy.

Second, although the contemporary women’s movement is sometimes blamed for the divorce rate by making women think marriage is an oppressive institution, the trends in Figure 11.9 "Number of Divorces per 1,000 Married Women Age 15 or Older, 1960–2009" suggest this blame is misplaced. The women’s movement emerged in the late 1960s and was capturing headlines by the early 1970s. Although the divorce rate obviously rose after that time, it also started rising several years before the women’s movement emerged and capturing headlines. If the divorce rate began rising before the women’s movement started, it is illogical to blame the women’s movement. Instead, other structural and cultural forces must have been at work, just as they were at other times in the last century, as just noted, when the divorce rate rose and fell.

Why, then, did divorce increase during the 1960s and 1970s? One reason is the increasing economic independence of women. As women entered the labor force in the 1960s and 1970s, they became more economically independent of their husbands, even if their jobs typically paid less than their husbands’ jobs. When women in unhappy marriages do become more economically independent, they are more able to afford to get divorced than when they have to rely entirely on their husbands’ earnings (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O’Rand, 1998). Hiedemann, B., Suhomlinova, O., & O’Rand, A. M. (1998). Economic independence, economic status, and empty nest in midlife marital disruption. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 60*, 219–231. When both spouses work outside the home, moreover, it is more difficult to juggle the many demands of family life, especially child care, and family life can be more stressful. Such stress can reduce marital happiness and make divorce more likely. Spouses may also have less time for each other when both are
working outside the home, making it more difficult to deal with problems they may be having.

Figure 11.10

Disapproval of divorce has declined since the 1950s, and divorce is now considered a normal if unfortunate part of life.

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It is also true that disapproval of divorce has declined since the 1950s, even if negative views of it still remain (Cherlin, 2009b). Cherlin, A. J. (2009b). The origins of the ambivalent acceptance of divorce. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 71*(2), 226–229. Not too long ago, divorce was considered a terrible thing; now it is considered a normal if unfortunate part of life. We no longer say a bad marriage should continue for the sake of the children. When New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller ran for president in the early 1960s, the fact that he had been divorced hurt his popularity, but when California Governor Ronald Reagan ran for president less than two decades later, the fact that he had been divorced was hardly noted. But is the growing acceptability of divorce a cause of the rising divorce rate, or is it the result of the rising divorce rate? Or is it both a cause and result? This important causal order question is difficult to resolve.

Another reason divorce rose during the 1960s and 1970s may be that divorces became easier to obtain legally. In the past, most states required couples to prove that one or both had committed actions such as mental cruelty, adultery, or other such behaviors in order to get divorced. Today almost all states have no-fault divorce laws that allow a couple to divorce if they say their marriage has failed from irreconcilable differences. Because divorce has become easier and less expensive to obtain, more divorces occur. But are no-fault divorce laws a cause or result of the post-1950s rise in the divorce rate? The divorce rate increase preceded the establishment of most states’ no-fault laws, but it is probably also true that the laws helped make additional divorces more possible. Thus no-fault divorce laws are probably one reason for the rising divorce rate after the 1950s, but only one reason (Kneip & Bauer, 2009). Kneip, T., & Bauer, G. (2009). Did unilateral divorce laws raise divorce rates in Western Europe? *Journal of Marriage & Family, 71*(3), 592–607.
We have just looked at possible reasons for divorce rate trends, but we can also examine the reasons why certain marriages are more or less likely to end in divorce within a given time period. Although, as noted earlier, 40%–50% of all new marriages will probably end in divorce, it is also true that some marriages are more likely to end than others. Family scholars identify several correlates of divorce (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Wilcox, 2009). Clarke-Stewart, A., & Brentano, C. (2006). Divorce: Causes and consequences. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Wilcox, W. B. (Ed.). (2009). The state of our unions 2009: Marriage in America. Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project, University of Virginia. An important one is age at marriage: teenagers who get married are much more likely to get divorced than people who marry well into their 20s or beyond, partly because they have financial difficulties and are not yet emotionally mature. A second correlate of divorce is social class: people who are poor at the time of their marriage are more likely to get divorced than people who begin their marriages in economic comfort, as the stress of poverty causes stress in marriage. Divorce is thus another negative life chance of people at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.

Effects of Divorce and Single-Parent Households

Much research exists on the effects of divorce on spouses and their children, and scholars do not always agree on what these effects are. One thing is clear: divorce plunges many women into poverty or near-poverty (Gadalla, 2008). Gadalla, T. M. (2008). Gender differences in poverty rates after marital dissolution: A longitudinal study. Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 49(3/4), 225–238. Many have been working only part-time or not at all outside the home, and divorce takes away their husband’s economic support. Even women working full-time often have trouble making ends meet, because, as we saw in earlier chapters, so many are in low-paying jobs. One-parent families headed by a woman for any reason are much poorer ($30,296 in median annual income) than those headed by a man ($44,358). Meanwhile, the median income of married-couple families is much higher ($72,589). Almost 30% of all single-parent families headed by women are officially poor.

Although the economic consequences of divorce seem clear, what are the psychological consequences for husbands, wives, and their children? Are they better off if a divorce occurs, worse off, or about the same? The research evidence is very conflicting. Many studies find that divorced spouses are, on average, less happy and have poorer mental health after their divorce, but some studies find that happiness and mental health often improve after divorce (Williams, 2003; Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2009). Williams, K. (2003). Has the future of marriage arrived? A contemporary examination of gender, marriage, and psychological well-being. Journal of Health & Social Behavior, 44, 470–487; Waite, L. J., Luo, Y., & Lewin, A. C. (2009). Marital happiness and marital stability: Consequences for psychological well-being. Social Science Research, 38(1), 201–212. The postdivorce time period that is studied may affect what results are found: for some people psychological well-being may decline in the immediate aftermath of a divorce, given how difficult the divorce process often is, but rise over the next few years. The contentiousness of the marriage may also matter. Some marriages ending in divorce have been filled with hostility, conflict, and sometimes violence, while other marriages ending in divorce have not been very contentious at all, even if they have failed. Individuals seem to fare better psychologically after ending a very contentious marriage but fare worse after ending a less contentious marriage (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Amato, P. R., & Hohmann-Marriott, B. (2007). A comparison of high- and low-distress marriages that end in divorce. Journal of Marriage & Family, 69(3), 621–638.

What about the children? Parents used to stay together “for the sake of the children,” thinking that divorce would cause their children more harm than good. Studies of this issue generally find that children in divorced families are indeed more likely, on average, to do worse in school, to use drugs and alcohol and suffer other behavioral problems, and to

However, it is sometimes difficult in these studies to determine whether the effects on children stem from the divorce itself or, instead, from the parental conflict that led to the divorce. This problem raises the possibility that children may fare better if their parents end a troubled marriage than if their parents stay married. The evidence on this issue generally mirrors the evidence for spouses just cited: children generally fare better if their parents end a highly contentious marriage, but they fare worse if their parents end a marriage that has not been highly contentious (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hull, Meier, & Ortyl, 2010). Booth, A., & Amato, P. R. (2001). Parental predivorce relations and offspring postdivorce well-being. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 63*(1), 197; Hull, K. E., Meier, A., & Ortyl, T. (2010). The changing landscape of love and marriage. *Contexts, 9*(2), 32–37.

### Children in Poverty

The statistics on children and poverty are discouraging (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2010). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2009* (Current Population Report P60–238). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Children under 18 represent 35% of all poor Americans even though they constitute only 25% of the population. About 21% of U.S. children live in poverty, a figure that rises to 44% for children living just with their mothers and to 54% for children under the age of 6 living just with their mothers. As with many things, race and ethnicity play an important role: African American and Latino children are more than three times as likely as non-Latino white children to live in poverty (see Figure 11.11 “Race, Ethnicity, and Percentage of Children Below Poverty Level, 2009”).

![Figure 11.11 Race, Ethnicity, and Percentage of Children Below Poverty Level, 2009](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpsta.../new03_100.htm).

Much research finds that poor children are at increased risk for behavioral, psychological, and health problems not only during childhood and adolescence but also well into their adult years (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). Wagmiller, R. L., & Adelman, R. M. (2009). *Childhood and intergenerational poverty: The long-term consequences of growing up poor*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University. In a type of vicious cycle, children growing up in poor households are at greater risk continuing to live in poverty after they reach adulthood.
Figure 11.12

Poor children are at increased risk for behavioral, psychological, and health problems, not only during childhood and adolescence, but also well into adulthood.

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Childhood poverty is higher in the United States than in any other Western democracy, and poor children in the United States fare worse than their counterparts in other Western democracies (Jäntti, 2009). Jäntti, M. (2009). Mobility in the United States in comparative perspective. In M. Cancian & S. Danziger (Eds.), Changing poverty, changing policies (pp. 180–200). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. A major reason for this is that the United States lacks the large, national programs other Western democracies have both for preventing poverty and for helping children and adults already living in poverty. These programs include housing allowances, free or subsidized day care and preschool programs, and some form of national health insurance. The experience of other Western democracies indicates that the number of U.S. poor children and the problems they face are much higher than they need to be (Waldfogel, 2009)


Learning From Other Societies

Reducing Child Poverty in Great Britain

When the Labour government under Prime Minister Tony Blair took power in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s, 26.1% of British children lived in poverty. The government announced an ambitious plan to eliminate child poverty entirely by 2020, and the success of the plan so far offers some important lessons for the United States.

The government devised an antipoverty strategy that included three components, borrowed generally from policies used in the United States but implemented with greater funding and carried out more extensively (Waldfogel, 2010):

Waldfogel, J. (2010). Britain’s war on poverty. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. (a) a jobs program for poor parents, coupled with government-subsidized day care for their children; (b) substantial cash supports and tax credits for poor families; and (c) greatly increased programs and services for poor children and their families, including

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_(Barkan)/11%3A_The_Family/11.05%3A_Change…

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home visitation, parenting education, and early childhood education. In all of these respects, the British government viewed its antipoverty effort as more far-reaching than the U.S. effort. As one British official explained, "We have more public funding and we have more of a focused government view that we have to eliminate child poverty, not just ameliorate it. That's a big cultural difference" (Nelson & Whalen, 2006, p. A1). Nelson, E., & Whalen, J. (2006, December 22). With U.S. methods, Britain posts gains in fighting poverty. The Wall Street Journal, p. A1.

The government’s strategy helped reduce child poverty significantly in just a few years. From its rate of 26.1% when the Labour government took power in the later 1990s, the child poverty rate fell by half to 12.7% just 7 years later (2005–2006). Although it had risen slightly to 13.4% by 2007–2008, this rate remained significantly lower than the rate at the beginning of the government’s new effort.

Some U.S. observers hailed this British success story, with one columnist noting that there’s no denying that the Blair government has done a lot for Britain’s have-nots. Modern Britain isn’t paradise on earth, but the Blair government has ensured that substantially fewer people are living in economic hell…. [T]he Blair years have shown that a government that seriously tries to reduce poverty can achieve a lot. (Krugman, 2006, p. A25) Krugman, P. (2006, December 25). Helping the poor, the British way. The New York Times, p. A25.

The British experience indicates that the United States could indeed reduce child poverty and the number of poor families significantly if it adopted policies, programs, and services similar to those Britain has used since the late 1990s. Ironically Britain’s inspiration for many of these measures came from the United States, but Britain then funded and implemented them much more extensively. If the United States were to learn from Britain’s example, it, too, could reduce child poverty and help poor families in other ways.

To help poor children, several U.S. states and communities have implemented prenatal and early childhood visitation programs, in which nurses, social workers, and other professionals make regular visits to the homes of low-income mothers whose children are at risk for the problems mentioned earlier (Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, 2007). Olds, D. L., Sadler, L., & Kitzman, H. (2007). Programs for parents of infants and toddlers: Recent evidence from randomized trials. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 48, 355–391. These programs have increased poor children’s health and reduced their behavioral and psychological problems, not only during childhood but also into adolescence and young adulthood (Piquero, Farrington, Welsh, Tremblay, & Jennings, 2009). Piquero, A. R., Farrington, D. P., Welsh, B. C., Tremblay, R., & Jennings, W. (2009). Effects of early family/parent training programs on antisocial behavior and delinquency. Journal of Experimental Criminology 5, 83–120. For this reason, the programs save much more money than they cost, and continued investment in such programs promises to provide a cost-effective means of helping the many U.S. children who live in poverty.

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**Working Mothers and Day Care**

As noted earlier, women are now much more likely to be working outside the home than a few decades ago. This is true for both married and unmarried women and also for women with and without children. As women have entered the labor force, the question of who takes care of the children has prompted much debate and controversy. Many observers have said that young children suffer if they do not have a parent, implicitly their mother, taking care of them full-time until they start school and being there every day when they get home from school (Morse, 2001). Morse, J. R. (2001). Love & economics: Why the laissez-faire family doesn’t work. Dallas, TX: Spence. What does research say about how young
children fare if their mothers work? (Notice that no one seems to worry that fathers work!)

Early studies compared the degree of attachment shown to their mothers by children in day care and that shown by children who stay at home with their mothers. In one type of study, children were put in a laboratory room with their mothers and observed as the mothers left and returned. The day-care kids usually treated their mothers’ departure and returning casually and acted as if they did not care that their mothers were leaving or returning. In contrast the stay-at-home kids acted very upset when their mothers left and seemed much happier and even relieved when they returned. Several researchers concluded that these findings indicated that day-care children lacked sufficient emotional attachment to their mothers (Schwartz, 1983). Schwartz, P. (1983). Length of day-care attendance and attachment behavior in eighteen-month-old infants. Child Development, 54, 1073–1078. However, other researchers reached a very different conclusion: the day-care children’s apparent nonchalance when their mothers left and returned simply reflected the fact that they always saw her leave and return every day when they went to day care. The lack of concern over her behavior simply showed that they were more independent and self-confident than the stay-at-home children, who were fearful when their mothers left, and not that they were less attached to their mothers (Coontz, 1997). Coontz, S. (1997). The way we really are: Coming to terms with America’s changing families. New York, NY: Basic Books.

More recent research has studied children, both those who stayed at home and those who entered day care, over time starting with infancy, with some of the most notable studies examining data from a large, $200 million study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, a branch of the National Institutes of Health (Rabin, 2008). Rabin, R. C. (2008, September 15). A consensus about day care: Quality counts. The New York Times, p. A1. These studies have found that day-care children exhibit better cognitive skills (reading and arithmetic) than stay-at-home children but are also slightly more likely to engage in aggressive behavior that is well within the normal range of children’s behavior. This research has also yielded two other conclusions. First, the quality of parenting and other factors such as parent’s education and income matter much more for children’s cognitive and social development than whether or not they are in day care. Second, to the extent that day care is beneficial for children, it is high-quality day care that is beneficial, as low-quality day care can be harmful.

**Figure 11.13**

Children in day care exhibit better cognitive skills than stay-at-home children but are also slightly more likely to
**Engage in aggressive behavior that is within the normal range of children’s behavior.**

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This latter conclusion is an important finding, because many day-care settings in the United States are not high quality. Unfortunately, many parents who use day care cannot afford high-quality care, which can cost several hundred dollars per month. This problem reflects the fact that the United States lags far behind other Western democracies in providing subsidies for day care, as noted earlier. Because working women are certainly here to stay and because high-quality day care seems at least as good for children as full-time care by a parent, it is essential that the United States make good day care available and affordable.

### Marriage and Well-Being

Is marriage good for people? This is the flip side of the question addressed earlier on whether divorce is bad for people. Are people better off if they get married in the first place? Or are they better off if they stay single?

In 1972, sociologist Jessie Bernard (1972) famously said that every marriage includes a “her marriage” and a “his marriage.” By this she meant that husbands and wives view and define their marriages differently. When spouses from the same marriage are interviewed, they disagree on such things as how often they should have sex, how often they actually do have sex, and who does various household tasks. Women do most of the housework and child care, while men are freer to work and do other things outside the home. Citing various studies, she said that marriage is better for men than for women. Married women, she said, have poorer mental health and other aspects of psychological well-being than unmarried women, while married men have better psychological well-being than unmarried men. In short, marriage was good for men but bad for women.

*Figure 11.14*
Married people are generally happier than unmarried people and score higher on other measures of psychological well-being.

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Critics later said that Bernard misinterpreted her data on women and that married women are also better off than unmarried women (Glenn, 1997). Glenn, N. D. (1997). A critique of twenty family and marriage and the family textbooks. *Family Relations, 46*, 197–208. Contemporary research generally finds that marriage does benefit both sexes: married people, women and men alike, are generally happier than unmarried people (whether never married, divorced, or widowed), score better on other measures of psychological well-being, are physically healthier, have better sex lives, and have lower death rates (Williams, 2003; Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2009). Williams, K. (2003). Has the future of marriage arrived? A contemporary examination of gender, marriage, and psychological well-being. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior, 44*, 470–487; Waite, L. J., Luo, Y., & Lewin, A. C. (2009). Marital happiness and marital stability: Consequences for psychological well-being. *Social Science Research, 38*(1), 201–212. There is even evidence that marriage helps keep men from committing crime (Laub, 2004). Laub, J. H. (2004). The life course of criminology in the United States: The American Society of Criminology 2003 presidential address. *Criminology, 42*, 1–26. Marriage has these benefits for several reasons, including the emotional and practical support spouses give each other, their greater financial resources compared to those of unmarried people, and the sense of obligation that spouses have toward each other.

Three issues qualify the general conclusion that marriage is beneficial. First, it would be more accurate to say that good marriages are beneficial, because bad marriages certainly are not (Frech & Williams, 2007). Frech, A., & Williams, K. (2007). Depression and the psychological benefits of entering marriage. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 48*, 149–163. Second, although marriage is generally beneficial, its benefits seem greater for older adults than for younger adults, for whites than for African Americans, and for individuals who were psychologically depressed before marriage.
than for those who were not depressed (Frech & Williams, 2007). Frech, A., & Williams, K. (2007). Depression and the psychological benefits of entering marriage. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 48*, 149–163. Third, psychologically happy and healthy people may be the ones who get married in the first place and are less apt to get divorced once they do marry. If so, then marriage does not promote psychological well-being; rather, psychological well-being promotes marriage. Research testing this *selectivity hypothesis* finds that both processes occur: psychologically healthy people are more apt to get and stay married, but marriage also promotes psychological well-being.

### Sociology Making a Difference

**Gender Ideology and Marital Happiness**

As the text points out, marriage seems to promote personal happiness and other aspects of psychological well-being. One reason this happens is undoubtedly the happiness that many spouses find in the marriage itself. Not surprisingly, there is a large body of research on why some marriages are happier (or unhappier) than other marriages (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2006). Kaufman, G., & Taniguchi, H. (2006). Gender and marital happiness in later life. *Journal of Family Issues, 27*(6), 735–757. Also not surprisingly, some of the factors discussed elsewhere in the text that promote the likelihood of divorce, such as marrying at a young age and experiencing financial strain, also contribute to marital unhappiness. When spouses have health problems, marital happiness also tends to be lower.

An additional factor that may influence marital happiness is *gender ideology*. A spouse who holds *traditional* ideology believes that the man is the ruler of the household and that the woman’s primary role is to be a homemaker and caretaker of children. A spouse who holds *egalitarian* (or *nontraditional*) ideology believes that a woman’s place is not necessarily in the home and that both spouses should share housework, child care, and other responsibilities. Some scholars speculate that the rise in divorce during the 1960s and 1970s was partly due to a rise in egalitarian ideology among women that conflicted with their husbands’ traditional ideology. Supporting this speculation, some studies summarized by sociologists Gayle Kaufman and Hiromi Taniguchi (2006) find that wives with traditional attitudes are happier in their marriages than wives with egalitarian attitudes. At the same time, studies have also found that husbands with egalitarian attitudes are happier in their marriages than husbands with traditional attitudes.

Thus gender ideology may have opposite effects by gender on marital happiness: wives are happier in their marriages when they hold traditional attitudes, while husbands are happier when they hold egalitarian attitudes. This “dual” result is perhaps not very surprising. As wives moved increasingly into the labor force during the past few decades but still found themselves having the primary responsibility for housework and child care, it makes sense to think that those with traditional attitudes would be happier with this situation and those with egalitarian attitudes would be less happy. By the same token, it makes sense to think that husbands with egalitarian attitudes would be happier with this situation and husbands with traditional attitudes less happy.

This body of research has focused on relatively young couples and neglected those past their 40s. Addressing this neglect, Kaufman and Taniguchi examined the possible effects of gender ideology and other factors on marital happiness in a sample of married couples in Iowa whose ages were between 51 and 92. Wives’ gender ideology did not affect their marital happiness, but men’s gender ideology did affect their marital happiness, as men with egalitarian attitudes were happier.
By extending the research on gender ideology and marital happiness to couples past their 40s, Kaufman and Taniguchi’s study reinforced the conclusion of prior research that egalitarian attitudes increase husbands’ marital happiness. This finding has at least two practical implications. First, if we can assume that men’s gender ideology will continue to become more egalitarian as traditional gender roles decline over time, it makes sense to think that their marital happiness will increase. Second, educational campaigns and other efforts that promote egalitarian attitudes among men should increase their marital happiness and thus reduce their desire to divorce. By pointing to the importance of expanding men’s egalitarian attitudes for marital happiness, the work by sociologists Kaufman and Taniguchi has helped make a difference.

### Gay and Lesbian Couples and Marriages

One of the most controversial issues concerning the family today is that of gay and lesbian marriages. According to census data, about 800,000 same-sex couples now live together in the United States, and about one-fifth of these couples are raising at least one child under age 18; the number of children being raised by same-sex couples is about 270,000 (Barkan, Marks, & Milardo, 2009). Barkan, S., Marks, S., & Milardo, R. (2009, September 22). Same-sex couples are families, too. *Bangor Daily News*. Retrieved from [http://www.bangordailynews.com/detail/121751.html](http://www.bangordailynews.com/detail/121751.html)

Five states permit same-sex marriage as of July 2010—Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Iowa, and Vermont—along with Washington, DC. Several other states recognize civil unions or provide some legal benefits to same-sex couples, but civil union status does not afford couples the full range of rights and privileges that married couples enjoy. Thirty-two states have laws or constitutional amendments that ban same-sex marriage. Internationally, same-sex marriage is permitted in Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden.

*Figure 11.15*
Same-sex marriage is one of the most controversial issues concerning the family today. Marriage between same-sex couples is currently permitted in only a handful of states and nations.

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Among other arguments, opponents of same-sex marriages say that they threaten the stability of the institution of marriage and that children of same-sex couples fare worse in several respects than those raised by both their biological parents (Benne & McDermott, 2009). Benne, R., & McDermott, G. (2009). Gay marriage threatens families, children, and society. In R. Espejo (Ed.), Gay and lesbian families (pp. 11–15). Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press. However, the social science evidence fails to support either of these two arguments. There is no evidence that heterosexual marriages have been undermined in the five states that have legalized same-sex marriage. For example, Massachusetts, which has allowed same-sex marriage since 2004, continues to have one of the lowest divorce rates in the nation. Regarding children of same-sex couples, studies find that their psychological well-being is as high as those of children of heterosexual couples. As a review of this body of research concluded, “Because every relevant study to date shows that parental sexual orientation per se has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on children’s mental health or social adjustment, there is no evidentiary basis for considering parental sexual orientation in decisions about children’s ‘best interest’” (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 176).

Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Marriages and Families

Marriages and families in the United States exhibit a fair amount of racial and ethnic diversity, as we saw earlier in this chapter. Children are more likely to live with only one parent among Latino and especially African American families than among white and Asian American families. Moreover, African American, Latino, and Native American children and their families are especially likely to live in poverty. As a result, they are at much greater risk for the kinds of problems outlined earlier for children living in poverty.

Beyond these cold facts lie other racial and ethnic differences in family life (Taylor, 2002). Taylor, R. L. (2002). Minority families in the United States: A multicultural perspective (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. Studies of Latino and Asian American families find they have especially strong family bonds and loyalty. Extended families in both groups and among Native Americans are common, and these extended families have proven a valuable shield against the problems all three groups face because of their race and ethnicity and poverty.

The status of the African American family has been the source of much controversy for several decades. This controversy stems from several related statistics. Two of these we noted earlier: the large number of single-parent households among African Americans and their large number of children in such households. A third statistic concerns the number of births out of wedlock. Whereas 40% of all births are to unmarried women, such births account for 72% of all births to African American women. Many scholars attribute the high number of fatherless families among African Americans to the forcible separation of families during slavery and to the fact that so many young black males today are unemployed, in prison or jail, or facing other problems (Patterson, 1998).

Many observers say this high number of fatherless families in turn contributes to African Americans’ poverty, crime, and

Conclusion

- The divorce rate rose for several reasons during the 1960s and 1970s but has generally leveled off since then.
- Divorce often lowers the psychological well-being of spouses and their children, but the consequences of divorce also depend on the level of contention in the marriage that has ended.
- Despite continuing controversy over the welfare of children whose mothers work outside the home, research indicates that children in high-quality day care fare better in cognitive development than those who stay at home.
- Children of same-sex couples have psychological well-being as high as those of heterosexual couples. There is no evidence that same-sex marriage has undermined the stability of heterosexual marriage in the states where same-sex marriages are legal.

For Your Review

1. Think of someone you know (either yourself, a relative, or a friend) whose parents are divorced. Write a brief essay in which you discuss how the divorce affected this person.
2. Did your mother work outside the home while you were growing up? If so, do you think you were better or worse off because of that? If she did not work outside the home, how do you think things would have gone for you if she had?
3. What are your views regarding same-sex marriage? Do you think same-sex couples should be allowed to marry? Why or why not?