

Sociological Theory & Rising Divorce Rate in America

Applying Conflict Theory.

To explain why the U.S. divorce rate is high, conflict theorists focus on how men's and women's relationships have changed. For millennia, men dominated women. Women had few alternatives other than to accept their exploitation. Then industrialization ushered in a new world, one in which women could meet their basic survival needs outside of marriage. Industrialization also fostered a culture in which females participate in social worlds beyond the home. With this new ability to refuse to bear burdens that earlier generations accepted as inevitable, today's women are likely to dissolve a marriage that becomes intolerable—or even unsatisfactory.

In Sum: The dominance of men over women was once considered natural and right. As women gained education and earnings, however, they first questioned and then rejected this assumption. As wives strove for more power and grew less inclined to put up with relationships that they defined as unfair, the divorce rate increased. From the conflict perspective, then, our high divorce rate does not mean that marriage has weakened, but, rather, that women are making headway in their historical struggle with men.

Applying Functional Analysis:

Functionalists stress that industrialization and urbanization undermined the traditional functions of the family. For example, before industrialization, the family formed an economic team. On the farm where most people lived, each family member had jobs or "chores" to do. The wife was in charge not only of household tasks but also of raising small animals, such as chickens. Milking cows, collecting eggs, and churning butter were also her responsibility—as were cooking, baking, canning, sewing, darning, washing, and cleaning. The daughters helped her. The husband was responsible for caring for large animals, such as horses and cattle, for planting and harvesting, and for maintaining buildings and tools. The sons helped him. Together, they formed an economic unit in which each depended on the others for survival. This certainly doesn't sound like life today!

Other functions also bound family members to one another: educating the children, teaching them religion, providing home-based recreation, and caring for the sick and elderly. To further see how sharply family functions have changed, look at this example from the 1800s:

When Phil became sick, he was nursed by Ann, his wife. She cooked for him, fed him, changed the bed linens, bathed him, read to him from the Bible, and gave him his medicine. (She did this in addition to doing the housework and taking care of their six children.) Phil was also surrounded by the children, who shouldered some of his chores while he was sick. When Phil died, the male neighbors and relatives made the casket while Ann, her mother, and female friends washed and dressed the body. Phil was then "laid out" in the front parlor (the formal living room), where friends, neighbors, and relatives paid their last respects. From there, friends moved his body to the church for the final message and then to the grave they themselves had dug.

In Sum: When the family loses functions, it becomes more fragile, and an increase in divorce is inevitable. Economic production is an excellent example of how the family has lost functions. No longer is making a living a cooperative, home-based effort, with husband and wife depending on one another for their interlocking contributions to a

mutual endeavor. Husbands and wives today earn individual paychecks and increasingly function as separate components in an impersonal, multinational, and even global system. The fewer functions that family members share, the fewer are their “ties that bind”—and these ties are what help husbands and wives get through the problems they inevitably experience.

Applying Symbolic Interactionism:

The meaning of divorce: As divorce became more common, its meaning changed. Rather than being a symbol of failure, divorce came to indicate freedom and new beginnings. Removing the stigma from divorce shattered a strong barrier that had prevented husbands and wives from breaking up.

Changed guidelines: Related symbols also changed—and none of these changes strengthened marriage. For example, traditional marriage had firm guidelines, and newlyweds knew what each was supposed to do regarding work, home, and children. In contrast, today’s guidelines are vague, and couples must figure out how to divide up responsibilities. This can be a struggle, even a source of conflict, and many flounder. Although couples find it a relief not to have to conform to what they consider to be burdensome notions, those traditional expectations (or symbols) did provide a structure that made marriages last. Changing symbols weakened this structure, making marriage more fragile and divorce more common.

The meaning of parenthood: Ideas of parenthood and childhood also used to be quite different. Parents had little responsibility for their children beyond providing food, clothing, shelter, and moral guidance. And they needed to do this for only a short time, because children began to contribute to the support of the family early in life. Among many people, parenthood is still like this. In Colombia, for example, children of the poor often are expected to support themselves by the age of 8 or 10. In industrial societies, however, we assume that children are vulnerable beings who must depend on their parents for financial and emotional support for many years—often until they are well into their 20s. That this is not the case in many cultures often comes as a surprise to Americans, who assume that their own situation is some sort of worldwide, natural arrangement. The greater responsibilities that we assign to parenthood place heavy burdens on today’s couples and, with them, more strain on marriage.

The meaning of love: And we can’t overlook the love symbol. As surprising as it may sound, to have love as the main reason for marriage is to weaken marriage. In some depth of our being, we expect “true love” to deliver constant emotional highs. This expectation sets people up for crushed hopes, as dissatisfactions in marriage are inevitable. When they come, spouses tend to blame one another for failing to deliver the expected satisfaction.

In Sum: Symbolic interactionists look at how changing ideas (or symbols) of love, marriage, relationships, parenthood, and divorce put pressure on married couples. No single change is *the* cause of our divorce rate, but, taken together, these changes provide a strong push toward divorce.