

Is the Family in Trouble?

Is family life on the decline? An examination of survey results suggests a good deal of ambiguity in the way that people respond to this important question.

In the abstract, we value families highly. Numerous studies conducted over the past several decades clearly demonstrate that most people in Canada continue to rate a happy marriage as far more important than more individualistic goals such as a rewarding job. Family values rank first among high school seniors, and gain even more importance as the respondents mature into adulthood. Furthermore, satisfaction with family life continues to be highly correlated with overall life satisfaction.

On the other hand, a closer look shows that "...most people value marriage primarily for what they personally can get from it, not for what it does for their children, extended family, or community. The goal of 'having a happy marriage' currently ranks well above 'being married to the same person for life' and even farther above simply 'being married'" (Glenn 1992). This interpretation is supported by the rise in the divorce rate accompanied by the high proportion of people who remarry after divorce; people are not rejecting the institution of marriage when they get divorced, rather they reject the previous partner.

Surveys also documents that changes in the satisfaction with ones partner differs by age, with those in their early twenties which is understandable since this is the time when many marry or start relationships with the eventual marital partner. Satisfaction with marriage, on the other hand appear to change with changes in the life cycle and decline when the couple has young and demanding children and again when their children are in their rebellious teens (Wickens 1995).

Infidelity, on the other hand, may be increasing since the percentage who admit to having had an affair varies only a little by age, from a low of 16% of those aged 16 to 34 to 19 % of those over 55. There are relatively big differences in the percentage of Canadians who admit having had an affair with those on the prairies and in the Atlantic provinces being fifty percent lower than the national average and Quebecers being fifty percent higher (Angus Reid Group Inc.1997).

The evidence points towards the conclusion that Canadians are still embracing the institution of marriage. However, the institution is changing which is understandable when we consider that marriages have the potential to last much longer today than they did in the not so distant past due to the sharp decline in mortality.

Sources

Angus Reid Group Inc. 1997. Infidelity. Press Release Dated Sunday September 14, 1997.

Glenn, Norval D. "What Does Family Mean?" American Demographics, June, 1992, pp. 30-37.

Wickens, Barbara. "Finding Comfort in the Home". Maclean's. Vol. 108, No. 52 (December): 26.