Changing patterns of marriage and divorce

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Signposts

This article is essential reading for all students taking the 'families and households' option, but also raises important questions about culture and identity. The authors begin by pointing out earlier differences in patterns of separation and divorce between White British, Black Caribbean and British Asian families, which had led to suggestions that there were distinct patterns characterising these three groups. They then discuss the findings of their own research which not only show changes among the British Asian studied, but reveal complex patterns surrounding migration, arranged marriage, cultural issues and expectations of marriage. As with many other groups and other issues, there were also differences in attitude between the generations. This material will help you to demonstrate the skills of analysis and evaluation. Use it to discuss differences not only between some British Asians and other groups in society, but also within one section of the British Asian group. You can also use this material to show how more recent research casts doubt on earlier assumptions about marriage patterns among different ethnic groups.

Key concepts

- expectations of marriage, culture, traditional family values, arranged marriage, migration

In contrast to the general population, British Asians have long been assumed to represent the 'old-fashioned' family, with low rates of divorce. Are things changing?

British society is experiencing major changes in patterns of family formation, including a rise in cohabitation, lower rates of marriage, with marriage in general occurring later, and an increase in marriage and relationship breakdowns. The sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) argued that these changes are signs of people exercising greater 'individualism' in their decisions about how and with whom to live. Giddens argued that personal relationships no longer follow set scripts associated with unquestioned roles and obligations. Instead, relationships are now based on the expectation of a mutually satisfying, emotionally fulfilling personal partnership, and that if this is not forthcoming, then the relationship can be renegotiated.

The situation in the 1990s

In contrast to this wider move towards 'modern individualism', British Asians have long been assumed to represent the 'old-fashioned' family. Richard Berthoud (2000) first drew this conclusion on the basis of data from the 1993-94 Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities. Berthoud found the rate of divorce and separation among British Asians to be 4% compared to 9% for the White British majority and 10% for the Black Caribbean minority (p. 6 and p. 16). He suggested that there were three patterns of diversity in family formation in the UK:

- the Black Caribbean minority, furthest along the road to 'modern individualism'
- the White British majority, catching up with them
- British Asian minorities as the most committed to traditional family life

Changing British Asian families

However, in recent research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, we found Berthoud’s characterisation of British Asian family life is no longer appropriate, if it ever was (see Box 1 for some notes on the methodology of our research).

Our data indicate that the percentage of lone-parent families in British Asian populations has at least doubled since the data Berthoud analysed. In the 1991 Census, lone parents constituted 10% of British Pakistani and Bangladeshi families with dependent children and 9% of British Indian families (HMSO 1996, p. 53). However, in the 2011 Census this percentage was 17% for British Pakistani families, 16% for British Bangladeshi families and 11% for British Indian families (see Figure 1). These statistics are indications of a rise in long-term separation and divorce. More complicated patterns are explored in Qureshi (2004).

Through a qualitative research study, we explored what these changes mean for family relationships in one particular section of the British Asian population: Pakistani Muslims.

The pioneer migrant generation

In our attempt to understand the meaning of the statistics on separation and divorce, we found significant differences by generation. The generation of pioneer migrants from Pakistan, now in their 50s and 60s, were more strongly averse to separation and divorce than subsequent generations. They saw it as stigmatising and an affront to their family and personal reputation. They tried to conceal marital conflict from their families for as long as possible.

Once their marital problems became publicly known, their families made serious and lengthy efforts to mediate, to try to persuade the unhappy partner to stay in the marriage and to influence the estranged spouse to 'mend their ways'. Recurrent marital problems in the accounts of the older people concerned men's suspected infidelity before their wives joined them from Pakistan and the context of financial hardship and hard work that defined their early years after migrating to the UK.

Box 1 Methods

The study was carried out by Kavera Qureshi in London (2004-7, 2009) and Peterborough (2011). The study involved life-history interviews with British Pakistani men and women about ageing and family life, and it generated 28 interviews with people who described substantial marital conflict or who were actually separated or divorced. Qureshi also spent long periods of time with families informally. This allowed the researchers to analyse conversations with one spouse alongside conversations with the other spouse, their parents, in-laws or adult children, and therefore to understand more of the wider context of family relationships.

This ethnographic research method deepened the findings substantially. Women were usually more forthcoming in talking about marital instability than men, so the research offered more detailed insights into women's perspectives. This is revealing about the causes of marital breakdown because, as in the wider population, women make up the majority of British Asian divorce claimants.

Source: Office for National Statistics housed under the Open Government Licence v3.0

Figure 1 Families with dependent children by ethnic group and family type, 2011

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Young people and their parents are increasingly wary of the fact that the different outlooks of young people brought up in the UK and in Pakistan may produce marital conflict. However, many young people marry in Pakistan because of their parents’ strong wish to offer their children’s hand in marriage to their siblings’ children in Pakistan. This arises out of feelings of obligation as well as a desire to maintain close connections to their families in Pakistan through arranged marriages.

Changing expectations of marriage

There were, therefore, distinctive pressures in British Pakistani marriages resulting from marriage migration. However, it would be wrong to pin the recent rise in marital instability on the reproduction of traditional marriage practices and marriage migration. A major cause of marital conflict in the younger couples was an unmet desire for love, intimacy and fulfilment, which is also a fundamental cause of relationship breakdown in the wider UK population.

Farhat, for example, described her dissatisfaction in her arranged marriage in this way:

Reading the Qur’an. Religious traditions may be reinterpreted by young people to accommodate their own priorities in marriage

It’s hard to say that I love him but I care for him, to the extent that I can say that I love him. But I didn’t fall in love with him and he didn’t fall in love with me. He just goes quiet when I mention the word love.

The spark that Farhat missed in her marriage, ‘love’, was distinct from ‘care’, the kind of habitual affection developed through living and bringing up children together.

We found, for example, that young men and women talked a lot about Islamic ideas of what is acceptable within marriage, and these ideas provided them with the confidence to leave relationships if they were not satisfied. Saima, another British-born woman, described going through a process of learning and personal change as she researched the Islamic grounds for divorce and came to a different understanding from that with which she had been brought up.

Both my parents and myself never thought I could get a divorce, because we were taught, ‘taught’, ‘blindly following’ — about the fact that it’s the man’s job to give a divorce. It was a 5-year journey before I actually got the information through the Qur’an, through talking to people. That actually I could initiate a divorce. I said to my father, ‘Dad, I found this in the Qur’an, which says I have rights. If I’m not happy, just on the basis that I’m not happy, I can ask for a divorce. It’s called khul’. It was at a time when my family didn’t really want me to find out more. So Dad said he’d like to speak to the Inamas, saying ‘What’s this khul about? How does it happen?’

A MAJOR CAUSE OF MARITAL CONFLICT IN THE YOUNGER COUPLES WAS AN UNMET DESIRE FOR LOVE

Furthermore, as indicated by Saima’s example, we found evidence that young men and women’s families were more likely to support them to divorce if the marriage didn’t work out.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that Berthoud’s conclusions about there being three patterns of diversity in family formation in the UK are misplaced. This is not only because the lower rates of separation and divorce among British Asians have not been sustained, but also because it is not possible to draw a clear line between commitment to tradition and a move to ‘modern individualism’.

As we can see in the examples of Farhat and Saima, commitment to tradition can coexist with the pursuit of love, intimacy and personal fulfilment. Religious traditions may be reinterpreted in ways that provide young people with justification to pursue their own prerogatives in marriage. Parents’ commitment to arranged marriages is also not static, and there is evidence that some parents are re-evaluating their endorsement of arranged marriage and supporting their children to divorce and remarry. The rise in marital instability among British Pakistani Muslims does not represent a simple following in the footsteps of the White British majority, but is the outcome of complex, interacting and dynamic processes.

More research remains to be done to explore the similarities and differences across ethnic groups in the UK. Research with Black Caribbean populations suggests that it may be equally problematic to characterise their family life as ‘individualistic’ [see Shaw 2014 for a review]. In addition, we have outlined differences between the British Asian groups. While changes in marriage trends among British Bangladeshi may echo those we have discussed among British Pakistanis, the British Indian population is lagging behind in the trend of increasing lone parenthood, raising interesting sociological questions for future research.

References


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