

Discuss psychological research into the effects of marriage (or partnering) and parenthood

Marriage and parenting are normative, age-graded influences, i.e. a social or biological change that normally occurs at fairly predictable ages. Marriage involves a lasting personal commitment to another person but is subject to significant individual and cultural differences. For example, some people choose to cohabit before marriage, and in some arranged marriages there may be little or no choice of partner.

Over 90 per cent of adults in Western countries marry at least once. Research has consistently demonstrated that compared to single, widowed or divorced people, married people live longer, report feeling happier and are healthier, including experiencing lower rates of various mental disorders. The greater mortality of the unmarried relative to the married has been increasing over the past two to three decades, and divorced (and widowed) people in their 20s and 30s are especially vulnerable (Cramer, 1995).

However, there are gender differences in marriage satisfaction and benefits. Bee (1994) argues that men are the greatest beneficiaries of marriage, because a wife is a close confidant that a man is unlikely to have in any other relationship. In addition, wives provide more emotional warmth and support for husbands than husbands do for wives. Rutter & Rutter (1992) suggest that the benefits of marriage for women are counterbalanced by the stresses of giving up their career or combining a career and parenthood, and therefore sacrificing career progression. The gender difference in marriage benefits is confirmed by the higher rates of men's re-marriage following divorce, 75 per cent compared to 56 per cent for women.

Traditionally, parenthood has followed marriage, but increasingly it varies in meaning and impact more than any other life transition. It may involve a single parent, a homosexual couple, a cohabiting couple, or couples who adopt or foster children.

Fathers tend to take longer than women to become emotionally involved in pregnancy and may feel excluded after the birth if the mother becomes preoccupied with the baby. Research suggests that the role of fathers is changing. In America, Pleck (1999) compared 11 studies dating from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s with 13 studies conducted between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s in terms of fathers' engagement (their interaction with their children) and availability (i.e. the amount of time they spend near their children). Pleck found that engagement increased from 34.3 per cent to 43.5 per cent, while availability increased from 51.8 per cent to 65.6 per cent (both as a percentage of the mother's) between the two time periods. Pleck concluded that although men still perform less childcare than women, men's participation in family activities is increasing. These studies included mostly only married fathers, but when divorced fathers are taken into account a different picture emerges as many divorced fathers' contact with their children drops off rapidly after divorce. An increasing number of men remain unmarried and deny responsibility for their children. The overall effect is that more children are living without resident fathers.

Kremer (1998) suggests that in the 21st century, motherhood is associated with many stereotypes and in particular the 'motherhood mandate' that refers to the belief that women are born and reared to be mothers. There are three important implications of this belief. Firstly, Berryman (in Lacey, 1988) maintains that there is a consequent belief that mothering comes 'naturally' to women, despite ample research evidence that mothering is a skill that many women have to learn. Women who don't bond immediately with their babies therefore feel inadequate and guilty. However, according to Jones (1995), 20 per cent of women in the UK born between 1960 and 1990 are unlikely ever to become

mothers. These women are likely to be well-educated and middle-class, not necessarily pursuing a career but opting not to have children. A second implication of the 'motherhood mandate' is that it is generally considered 'unnatural' for a mother to leave her children, even if she has left them in the care of their father. However, since one in 20 absent parents is a woman (Lacey, 1998), this assumption is unlikely to be true. The third implication is that it is 'unnatural' for the mother of young children to go out to work. Research by Craig (1992) found that women are more likely than men to interrupt their careers, at least temporarily, to take care of children, while men rarely do.

Homosexual couples have always been involved in parenting through partners' previous heterosexual relationships. The recent increase in fostering/adoption of children by gay men and the ongoing 'lesbian baby boom' mean that many more homosexual couples are becoming parents. According to Kitzinger *et al.* (1998), initial research into gay and lesbian parenting focused on whether or how far the children of lesbians and, to a lesser extent, gay men could be distinguished psychologically from those of heterosexuals. On balance, this research suggested that these children were no more 'at risk' than children raised in heterosexual families. Increasingly, psychologists are researching areas that reflect the concerns of gay/lesbian parents themselves, including coming out to one's children and managing different co-parenting arrangements such as a lesbian mother with her female lover, her ex-husband, a gay male sperm donor or a gay male co-parent (Kitzinger *et al.*, 1998).

To understand the impact of life events such as marriage and parenthood, it is therefore vital to appreciate the considerable cultural and individual differences that exist, particularly in relation to gender. These life events must be examined in the broader context of social norms, which, at least in some Western countries, are constantly shifting.