The influence of a high divorce rate on Canadian society and possible solutions to the problem

Abstract – (to be included in Phase 4)

INTRODUCTION

Marriage - as defined by Haviland et al. - is "a social union or legal contract between spouses that establishes obligations between them" (Haviland et al, 2011:65). In practice, marriages represent something much more than this rigid definition for Canadian couples, children, and families in general. In Canada, the marriage-to-divorce ratio plays an important role in overall societal health. In the past, the makeup of Canadian families was fairly uniform in terms of structure. Families had one mom, one dad, and a set of children who lived as siblings. Things have changed considerably in Canada. "The mom-pop-and-three-kids-under-one-roof model that typified Canadian households of 50 years ago has morphed into a complex and diverse web of family ties involving divorcees, living alone, re-marriage, stepchildren, empty-nesters and multiple generations sharing a home" (CBC News, 2012). This is indicative of the fact that the typical Canadian family has been drastically altered. Canadian families are no longer comprised of the traditional role-players within their traditional roles. Furthermore, divorce has become more and more prevalent over the past 50 years. According to analysts, 45% of all marriages in the United States and Canada now end in divorce (Yen, 2009:48.) Furthermore, the number of Canadians who describe themselves as divorced or separated has been on the rise since 1961 (SEE APENDIX 1).

The situation above has become so dire that some theorists have even gone as far as to suggest that the institution of marriage should now be totally rejected by society (Moller, 2003:79). These Bachelor Theory proponents suggest that the practice of marriage is now irrelevant and has become part of a by-gone era. However, so long as people continue to be married in Canada - and subsequently get divorced at a high rate -the societal issues surrounding

these divorces are themselves still very relevant. In fact, the high frequency of divorce has been having a negative impact on Canadian children and Canadian society as a whole. According to Hanson, there are several main negative effects on children who suffer through the divorce of their parents. In this situation, children are more likely to smoke, be prescribed Ritalin, drop out of school, and be convicted of a crime (Hanson, 2013). Furthermore, children who live through a parental divorce are more likely to face an earlier death from heart disease, stroke, or other preventable condition. They are also much more likely to get divorced themselves later in life (Hanson, 2013).

Meanwhile, the negative implications of a high societal divorce rate are not only limited to children. Gerstel has discovered that the divorcees themselves suffer with poorer general health and higher cancer rates than their happily married counterparts. Divorcees are also much more likely to commit suicide (Gerstel, 2006:17). Conversely, others have noted a positive co-relation between healthy marriages and the health of those who live within them (Hone-McMahan, 2013: 29). If accepted, these findings (when combined with the high divorce rate) point to a disturbing trend in Canadian society. The increased frequency of divorce has had major implications for societal health. It has also negatively affected the well-being of children. This research assignment will seek to address and answer two questions. First, what are the changes that have taken place in Canadian society which have led to a higher divorce rate? Secondly, for those marriages that have managed to be successful, what themes and commonalities are shared between them? A society with a high divorce rate is less productive, less healthy, and less happy than one with a low divorce rate. Therefore, it would be inherently in Canadian society's interests to reduce the current divorce rate and see numbers drop back to pre-1960 levels.

THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Subheading 1 - What has changed?

Some literature concerning the current high divorce rate (and the reasons for it) cites

some fundamental changes that have occurred in Canadian society over the past fifty years.

Census data collected by Statistics Canada has shown a clear trend towards increases in divorce,

and subsequently, increases in the number of children being raised in non-traditional households

(Statistics Canada, 2011). The literature would indicate that there are several reasons for this

phenomenon. "In the past, only the economic status of women was enhanced through marriage;

however, as more women work nowadays, men gain more economically than women (Fry,

2010:3). This has led to more economic freedom for females. In turn, they have become less

materially reliant on their husbands and less likely to remain within loveless and/or unhappy

marriages. Furthermore, Cherlin suggests that people now view marriages more subjectively than

they did in previous decades (Cherlin, 2004:849). More people are becoming likely to live in

common law relationships and remain unmarried. A similar way of thinking is what has

prompted more people to give up on their marriage when times get tough (Cherlin, 2004:855). In

previous times, people had more of a fatalistic attitude towards marriage. "[They tended to

demonstrate a] greater commitment and effort towards rescuing a troubled marriage" (Hall,

2012:11). In short, the general consensus amongst the literature is that people are less likely to

place as much importance on saving their marriage today. Marriage has simply lost its previous

status as a bond that should last forever. Successfully married older couples would seem to

support this argument. "We simply believed we had no right to even think about divorce"

(Peplinski, 2013: 9). Due to the new reality, married couples are no more likely to 'bail-out'

during tough times, and therefore, the divorce rate has risen. This, in turn, has led to all of the undesirable societal realities that were noted above.

Subheading 2 – COMMUNICATION AND COMPROMISE

Within the literature, communication and compromise inside a marriage are often cited as overriding reasons for success. "The key ingredient to a successful marriage is communication….You sit and you talk things out, you don't just run (Innes, 2013:4). Successful communication involves each partner understanding one another. It also requires each partner to understand themselves. "It is important to know the difference between what you want and what you need. You can compromise on a want, but not a need" (Chan 2013). Out of compromise and communication, couples begin to develop deeper bonds of trust. "[In marriage] mutual trust is non-negotiable. It will lead to laughter, and growing old with someone you make better and who makes you better in return" (Chan, 2013). This trust (born of communication and compromise) can help to sustain married couples through the tougher times.

True communication between partners may involve difficult discussions that can make one partner feel uncomfortable; nevertheless, it is essential. "Sex itself can be a way to feel connected and communicate. Men sometimes use a sexual connection as a way to communicate. Women tend to see a sexual connection as the result of a happy and healthy communication" (Dickson, 2013:45). In this way, a relationship can be sustained longer and more happily as long as they let their partner know how thy feel. Couples must be able to express their needs through effective communication. Then, they must be able to develop a compromise in order to ensure that the needs which have been communicated are met.

SUBHEADING 3 – PUTTING THE WORK IN

Another theme common to the literature is the idea of working hard at relationships. "Marriages are really jobs. You have to show up every day and pay attention to what is required" (Ziggy, 2013:1). Nowadays, couples are much less likely to be willing to put the work into their marriage. In her book, *What to Do Before you Say 'I Do'*, Susan Ziggy points out several of the key components discussed above. She suggests that people must understand themselves in order to understand what they need from a partner. She further suggests that putting the work in at the start of a relationship can pay dividends later on during married life (Ziggy, 2013:2-19). This work often involves communications exercises and developing an ability to meet half way. Much of the literature also encourages married couples to attend various courses that are geared around developing and protecting a healthy marriage (Ziggy, 2013:120), (Nguyen, 2013), (Lluch, 2008:19), (Chan, 2013). The argument here is that – barring all but the most extreme problems – almost all marriages can be saved if couples are willing to put the work in. Marriage courses provide guides on how to rekindle relationships effectively. In other words, the course method is suitable for everyone, even those who have been married for many years, because it brings them closer together.

Ultimately, it is the closeness, or bond, (described above) that helps to sustain marriages over the long term. In Alex Lluch's work, *Simple Principles for a Happy and Healthy Marriage*, marriage is presented as a living organism. As such, it requires nurturing and sustenance just like any living creature. Lluch contends that one of the primary reasons for divorce is the fact that the marriage becomes starved of the things it needs most to succeed – trust, compassion, empathy and forgiveness (Lluch, 2008: 88). He further suggests that working proactively at the marriage helps to develop these traits. "Working at the marriage provides the couple with the tools they

need to effectively sustain their relationship" (Lluch, 2008:5). Therefore, by putting the work in, married couples can develop tools, create bonds, and foster a relationship that will be able to stand the test of time.

SUBHEADING 4 – CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

      The researched literature has shown one further commonality in terms of the themes of a successful marriage. Conflict inside a relationship can be a poison. It breeds mistrust, animosity and it ultimately breaks down the bonds which are required to hold a marriage together. In a 2003 article, Sally Meredith and Don Meredith cite the ability to avoid conflict as being paramount to a successful marriage (Meredith et al., 2003). Similarly, Thomas Bradbury and Frank Fincham contend that conflict ultimately creates an overwhelmingly negative atmosphere within a marriage. For them, the key to preventing divorce is the ability to turn negativity into new methods of positive thinking (Bradbury et al., 1990:33). Through positive thinking, and by always striving to see the up-side to a situation, couples can avoid falling into a trap of despair and a cycle of negativity that will ultimately bring down their marriage.

      The literature also suggests that being positive is not an excuse to avoid problems. Problems must be faced and dealt with through maturity and with tact. Some form of conflict is inherently unavoidable within a marriage. Conflicts will always pop-up from time to time, and what remains key is the way a couple deals with them. Ultimately, conflict will usually require some level of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a theme well covered within the literature. Indeed, as Fincham puts it in another article, "a happy marriage is a union of two good forgivers" (Fincham, 2011:559). Forgiveness can be a complicated business. Coombs has suggested that some couples run into problems when they equate forgiveness with complete amnesia. "In marriage, true

forgiveness does not mean condoning the wrong – nor does it mean pretending that the wrong is not that bad" (Coombs, 2013). Instead, married couples should try and identify the causes that led to the wrong being committed in the first place, and eliminate them.

Other research notes that conflict in marriage will tend to dissipate as the couple matures and becomes more accustomed to making marriage work. Fiona Macrae was able to identify that couples on their second marriages are more experienced and that they benefit from some lessons learned during their first marriage. This is demonstrated by the fact that failure rates of second marriages are only 31% while those for first marriages are around 45% (Macrae, 2013). Others contend that this phenomenon is largely due to the fact that improved conflict resolution techniques are developed and worked on precisely because a first marriage has failed. They suggest that younger people have not yet developed the maturity to properly handle conflict. "Conflicts are more common in "churning" relationships…These tend to be more prevalent amongst younger people" (Halpern-Meekin, 2013:12). Therefore, it could be suggested that couples should think about putting off marriage until they have had several relationships. The experience they develop with what does not work will then be able to help them with what should work – for the betterment of all.

DISCUSSION – TO BE INCLUDED IN PHASE 4
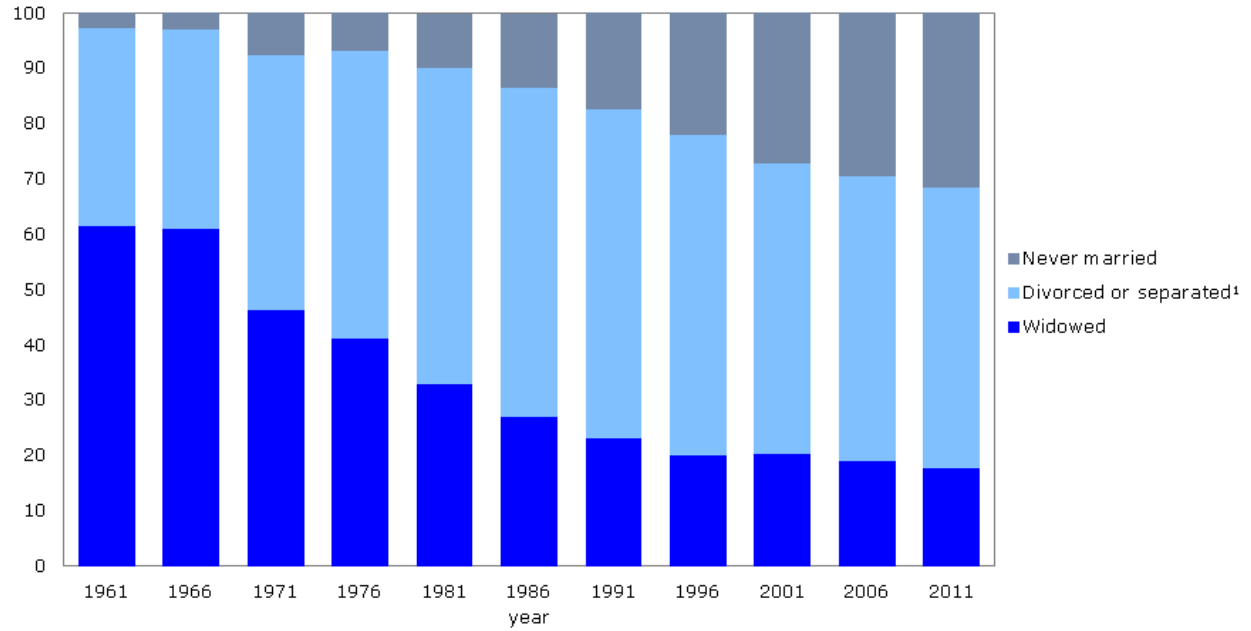
Appendix 1

Figure 1
Graph showing increase in Canadian population who identify themselves as never married, divorced, or separated (Statistics Canada, 2011)

Works Cited

Bradbury, Thomas & Frank Fincham. (1990). Attributions in Marriage. *Psychology Bulletin*, 107 (1), 3-33.

Canadian Press. (2012) Census Shows New Face of the Canadian Family. *CBC News,*
    September 19, 2012, from: http:// www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/09/19/census-data-
    families-households.html

Chan, Amy. (2013). Ideal partner someone who makes you better. *24 Hours Vancouver*
    April 4, 2013, from: http://vancouver.24hrs.ca/2013/04/04/ideal-partner-someone-who-makes-
    you-better

Cherlin, A. J. (2004). The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66
    (4), 848 – 861

Coombs, David. (2013).Forgiveness is necessary ingredient for a successful marriage. *The Spectrum*
    April. 9, 2013, from: http://www.thespectrum.com/article/20130407/FAMILY/304070022/
    Forgiveness-necessary-ingredient-successful-marriage?nclick_check=1

Dickinson, Amy. (2013).Husband heartbroken over sexless marriage. *Toronto Sun*
    April 25, 2013, pg. 45

Finchman, Frank. (2011). Forgiveness and Relationship Satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25,
    551-559.

Fry, Richard and Cohn, D'Vera (2010) *Women, Men and the New Economics of Marriage*. Washington,
    D.C: Pew Research Center

Gerstel, Naomi, et al. (2006) Marriage: The Good, the Bad, and the Greedy. *Contexts*, 5 (4) 16-21

Hall, Scott S. (2012). Implicit Theories of the Marital Institution. *Marriage & Family Review,* 48 (1)
    1-19

Halpern-Meekin, Sarah. et al. (2013). Relationship Churning, Physical Violence, and Verbal Abuse in
    Young Adult Relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family.* 75 (1) p. 2–12

Hanson, Lauren. (2013). 9 negative effects divorce reportedly has on children. *theweek.com*
    March 28, 2013, from: http://theweek.com/article/index/242059/9-negative-effects-divorce-
    reportedly-has-on-children

Haviland, William et al. (2011). *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge (13th ed.).*Stamford, CT:
    Cengage Learning.

Hone-McMahan, Kim. (2013). Healthy marriage may mean healthier you. *The Columbus Dispatch*.
April 18, 2013. pg. 29

Innes, Emily. (2013). Love Story Served up in Local Diner. *Collingwood Enterprise-Bulletin*
Tuesday, April 2, 2013. pg. 4

Lluch, Alex A. (2008) Simple Principles for a Happy and Healthy Marriage. San Diego, CA.: WS Publishing
Group

Macrae, Fiona. (2013). Couples in second marriages are 'less likely to get divorced' because they benefit
from experience of the first. *Daily Mail.* January 19, 2013, from: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/
news/article-2316323/Couples-second-marriages-likely-divorced-
benefit-experience-first.html?ito=feeds-newsxml

Meredith, Sally., and Don Meredith. (2003). Six Reasons Marriages Fail and How to Rise Above Them.
marriagesavingtips.org. from: http://www.marriagesavingtips.org/marriages-succeed-
fail-reasons-successful- failing-marriage/

Moller, Dan. (2003). An Argument Against Marriage. *Philosophy*, 78 (303), p. 79

Nguyen, Tony. (2013). Relationship Advice for Women. *PRWEB.* April 12, 2013.
From: http://www.digitaljournal.com/pr/1182360

Peplinski, Tina. (2013). 70 years and going strong for a local couple. *Pembroke Observer*
April 28, 2013. p. 9

Statistics Canada. (2011). Census Results. *Government of Canada.* from: http://www12.statcan.gc.ca
/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-312-x/2011003/fig/fig3_1-2-eng.cfm

Yen, Hope (2011). Census; divorce decline but 7 year itch persists. *The Globe and Mail*. September 23,
2011, p. 48

Ziggy, Susan. (2013). *What to Do Before You Say "I Do".* Bloomington, IL. Authorhouse: