

CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN FAMILIES, THE DECLINE OF MARRIAGE, AND
RECPERCUSSIONS ON SOCIETY: A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELLOR'S TOOL
FOR PSYCHO-EDUCATION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES.

by

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Abstract

This manuscript thesis contains four chapters that outline themes around contemporary North American marriage and families. Through extensive research via online databases, a copulation of themes and ideas have emerged as a result. From this research I have derived thorough knowledge on the evolution of contemporary North American families, its cause in relation to declining marriage rates, the repercussions this has on society, in addition to strategies and interventions marriages and family counsellors can use in their practice. There is a trend away from traditional relationships towards a diversity of alternatives. As the North American population experiences a decline of marriage rates there is an increase of single-parent, same-sex and blended families. This phenomena has political, social, religious, economic and educational repercussions on society. This thesis provides information into these repercussions and how marriage and family counsellors can help their clients through related issues. Mainly, the goal of this thesis is to educate counsellors on current knowledge of contemporary family structures and the decline of marriage, to better understand their clients and remain competent in their field.

Key words: contemporary families, single-parent families, North American society, decline of marriage, counselling theories

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Contemporary North American Families, the Decline of Marriage and Repercussions on Society:
A Marriage and Family Counsellors Tool for Psycho-Education and Intervention Strategies

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

North American society is currently witnessing a decline in marriage rates (i.e. the annual frequency of couples solidifying their relationship in matrimony) (Hazlett, 2014). Traditionally, marriage is a family-based institution and has major implications for how the members of a family interact. It is important for both the public and professionals to understand the changing relational dynamics that characterize families and marriage. Declining marriage rates reflect the growth of relationships that are alternatives to marriage and changes to social interactions. This is evident in the increasingly diverse family structures in North America. Family structures are defined by various factors, such as the number, age and relationship statuses of family members (e.g. a widowed 42 year-old woman with three children or a mid-forties couple without children). Many domains within society (e.g. government, religious, educational, social and economic) are affected by the contemporary diversity in family structures. For example, an increase in single-parent households is associated with declining marriage rates and an increase in families with low socio-economic statuses (Haskins, 2015). Such statistics inform an understanding of issues pertinent to marriage and families in contemporary society and the repercussions that changes in family dynamics have on various domains.

There is a growing cultural acceptance of marriage and family counselling among general North American populations (Chatel, 2015), which has pushed professional counsellors to attain relevant information about issues related to marriage and families. This information provides

visible evidence of the changing relational dynamics that are associated with contemporary family structures. As cohabitation before marriage has become increasingly common (Lee and Payne, 2010), government laws have had to evolve in order to protect the rights and possessions of those who cohabit (Family Law Act, 2015). Studies on the evolution of contemporary family structures and declining marriage rates have produced inconclusive results regarding the direct causality of the latter (Lee and Payne, 2010; Brandon and Bumpass, 2001; Smock and Manning, 2004). Lee and Payne (2010) contend that individuals delay marriage because higher education is more of a priority than starting a family, while Brandon and Bumpass (2001) claim that the increase in common-law marriages is a primary reason for the decline in marriage rates. In my view, the decline of marriage is due to the evolution of contemporary North American families, which reflects changes that have occurred within society and changes to what is considered appropriate or acceptable social behavior. These changes have influenced social, political, economic and religious institutions by challenging the status quo and leading to legislative amendments and the expansion of current legislation. In other words, changes to family structure influences responses from particular domains of society. Knowing the composition of current families and how that composition influences aspects of society will help marriage and family counsellors to understand declining marriage rates in North America. It will also help them to use psycho-education effectively as they support clients who are working through marriage and family issues.

Problem Statement

As stated, North American society is experiencing an overall decline in marriage rates. This phenomena is a product of changing family structures and effects North American's everyday lives by influencing their social learning as well as legal amendments, political

platforms and economic reforms. As shifts in social behaviour have implications for counselling professionals, a thorough analysis of contemporary family structures, the decline of marriage, and its repercussions in society will help them to better understand and help their clients.

Nature of the Study

The goal of this thesis is to compile knowledge in order to contribute to a more thorough understanding of current North American family structures and how these structures are contributing to declining marriage rates and changes within society. This thesis aims to use that knowledge as a resource for marriage and family counsellors who struggle with or who seek insight into contemporary marriage, cohabitation and family-related issues. It is important to note that reviewing how values may have changed in North American society as a result of declining marriage rates is beyond the scope of this paper.

The specific questions I will address are:

1. What are the compositional structures of contemporary North American families?
2. How are contemporary family structures contributing to the decline of marriage rates?
3. How do contemporary family structures and the decline of marriage impact different social institutions of?
4. What therapeutic strategies can marriage and family counsellor's use in their practice to assist clients who have issues related to contemporary family structures?

Contemporary families are becoming increasingly diverse. A substantial number of couples in long-term relationships are choosing to cohabit without getting married (Brandon and Bumpass, 2001) and having children out of wedlock (Cancian and Haskins, 2014). Declining marriage rates appear to be associated with a rise in divorce rates (Lee and Payne, 2010) and can

also be attributed to people's fear of divorce (Smock and Manning, 2004); a decrease in the association between marriage and major life milestones (e.g. moving in with a partner or starting a family), and; the unfavourable cost/benefits ratio of marriage for individuals with lower socio-economic status (SES) (Lee and Payne, 2010; Kalmijn, 2007).

Some couples find alternative relationships to be more beneficial than marriage (which will be discussed in Chapter three). The increase of traditional relationship statuses that are alternatives to marriage (single, divorced and widowed) has created a need for more research on the expansion of these and new relational dynamics. It is difficult for marriage and family counsellors to effectively address issues pertinent to alternative relationships and contemporary family structures without having extensive knowledge about those relationships and structures. The media and popular culture (e.g. themed TV shows, movies, magazines, blogs) show that North America is trending towards a greater acceptance of counselling as a means for resolving a variety of lifestyle and psychological problems, including marital and family discord (Chatel, 2015). Since there is an increase in the number of couples and families who attend counselling, more research on contemporary family structures and declining marriage rates is important for counsellors in the field. Compiling knowledge about postmodern families and marriage trends will make counsellors aware of changing relational dynamics and ensure that they remain competent, informed and up-to-date with respect to social changes that affect their practice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to compile a greater understanding of contemporary North American family structures and declining marriage rates. I will first analyze this phenomena by looking at the various structures of contemporary North American families. Second, I will

discuss how these structures effect marriage rates and different social institutions. The information I compile and discuss will constitute a resource for professional counsellors that enables them to become more informed about changes in contemporary family structures in order to better aid their clients with the issues they present. As marriage rates decline, further investigation into the repercussions of this phenomena is required in order to ensure that knowledge about it is current. This thesis' investigation is focused on exploring the evolution of contemporary family structures and the impact of these structures on the decline of marriage rates and societal domains. It intends to provide counsellors with useful information about family dynamics that will support their capacity to help clients address contemporary family issues. The ways in which relationships that are alternatives to marriage impact a couple's behaviour in society is not well known, so further investigation into this subject is needed. Compiling knowledge about contemporary marriages and families will help North American counsellors to be prepared to meet their clients' needs. This may in turn have positive ramifications for society that help various social and political figures to better serve the interests of couples who are in committed but non-marital relationships.

The increase in committed but non-marital relationships has changed the behavior of North American individuals in couples as well as perspectives of marriage and families in society at large (Cherlin, 2004). I will discuss the implications that contemporary family structures have on individuals who seek the help of a counsellor to deal with relationship or family issues. This thesis aims to improve clinicians' understanding of contemporary family structures so that they can provide their clients with competent psycho-education and relevant therapeutic strategies during therapy. I hope that reading Chapter four on intervention strategies will give counsellors a better understanding of counselling techniques to use with clients who are working through

issues related to contemporary family structures. This will serve a positive purpose for society as it adapts to the decline of marriage rates and the corresponding increase in relationships that are alternatives to marriage.

Scholarly Context

The current increase of alternative relationships (i.e. single-parent headed families) and the decline of marriage rates in North American society is captured by Statistics Canada data (StatsCan, 2006). The information and data presented in this thesis have been gathered from peer-reviewed and research-based articles via online databases. This form of information retrieval provides a significant amount of research-supported material related to family and marriage topics. The conceptual framework and methodology that underlies this thesis has produced a non-empirical manuscript based thesis. This research reviews literature pertaining to contemporary family structures and the associated decline of marriage rates (Creswell, 2014); thus, material researched within the past 30 years on the topics of families, marriage, and counselling interventions comprise the majority of information within this paper.

As defined by a manuscript thesis, research will involve investigating discourse related questions and discussing opinions, perspectives and themes around contemporary families and the decline of marriage (Creswell, 2014). From a constructivist worldview, I attempt to understand contemporary family compositions and the decline of marriages rates from a macro level rather than narrowing down specific concepts or ideas. This world view encourages a discussion which involves many overarching themes and ideas, which broadens the scope of information discussed. In order to investigate the sources contributing to declining marriage rates, I will look at the evolution of contemporary family structures. I will then extend this discussion into the repercussions contemporary family structures has on society. Through

extensive searches via online databases and books, I have found information to support common facts on postmodern families and its impact on North American society. In addition, ideas and discussion have been derived from other scholarly works that include fiction novels, which provide discursive and creative narratives and reflections, and online social websites. Balancing statistical data with narratives from popular culture and social websites/media are common elements of postmodern based analyses. Each of these elements are part of the overall discourse of marriage decline that I shall analyze in this manuscript.

Assumptions, Limits, and Scope

Statistical and demographical research has proven that there is, in fact, a decline in North American rates of marriage (StatsCan, 2006); however, the exact reason for this finding has yet to be uniformly accepted. Most literature on the topic suggests many factors and not a sole cause (Cherlin, 2009; Cherlin, 2004; Geist, 2010; Lee and Payne, 2010; Roberts et al., 2012). The analogy of what came first - the chicken or the egg - is evident when discussing the factors contributing to the decline of marriage rates. In this sense I ask: Were marriage rates effected by changing family structures, or are contemporary families a result of the decline of marriage? Despite general acceptance of the factors leading to marriage decline (Cherlin, 2009; Cherlin, 2004; Geist, 2010; Lee and Payne, 2010; Roberts et al., 2012), I content that change in contemporary family structures is the predominant reason marriage rates are declining. Along with this claim, repercussions of contemporary family structures lie betwixt and between societal institutions as expressed in government legislation, economic reform, education and changes around North American views of religion. The evolution of multiple, contemporary family structures are, in my opinion, the main reason and reflection for declining rates of marriage. The

singular “marriage” is giving way, in a plural and multifaceted postmodern sense. There is no longer one family structure.

Because of the relatively recent analysis of declining marriage rates, research has yet to fully interpret the extent of repercussions fewer marriages has on society. It is clear this social phenomena is taking place in North America, yet the supposed ‘unanimous cause’ and degree of marriage decline is still the subject of research and debate. Within this thesis I aim to support contemporary family structures, a plural conception, as a predominant factor of the declining rates of marriage and I strive to illustrate how these effect institutions of society. I then extend discussion on how this information can benefit marriage and family counsellors to psycho-educate and strategize interventions to assist their clients through related issues.

The information derived from this thesis is limited to North American society. Not all cultures across the world are experiencing a decline in marriage rates; thus, the information discussed in this manuscript cannot be generalized globally. However, I believe it is important to note that other first-world European countries (e.g. England, France, and Germany) have also witnessed a decline in marriage (Lee and Payne, 2010), yet the context and contributing factors may be similar or different from those I have mentioned for North America more broadly. Overall, scholars agree about the presence of marriage decline in North America and the change in contemporary family structures (Lee and Payne, 2010; Kalmijin, 2007).

Significance

Psycho-education related to changing dynamics in relationships (e.g. the evolution of contemporary families and declining marriage rates) will help professional counsellors to understand current marriage and family issues and be better able to tailor effective intervention

strategies in accordance to this phenomena. By making this knowledge available, counsellors may become more well-rounded and knowledgeable on how social behaviour is currently evolving. Demonstrating how domains in society are effected by the way people interact and behave, especially in contemporary North America, may help individuals accept their current relationship and normalize their family experience (Pinsof, 2002). The information expressed in this thesis will contribute to a greater understanding of changing family structures and declining rates of marriage in North America. Along with a greater understanding, counsellors can then use the intervention strategies outlined in chapter four to address presenting issues.

Readers may notice while reading the next chapter, that there is minimal discussion of the phenomena of marriage. This omission occurs because, in order to talk about marriage decline, there must first be an investigation of underlying factors and repercussions. Initial investigation on factors related to marriage decline and its repercussions primes for discussion around contemporary family structures and the effected domains of society, naturally leading to strategies professionals can use to assist struggling clients.

Family and marriage counsellors will benefit from the compiled knowledge around contemporary family structures and the decline of marriage by increasing their understanding of evolving social trends within North America. Through psycho-education, family and marriage counsellors can then pass this information onto their clients to help explain their situations and/or issues. This can help clients accept, normalize and work through various family and relationship issues (Bradly, 2010). In addition, Counsellors reading this thesis will become aware of effective intervention strategies their clients can use to address their presenting issues.

Contemporary family structures and the decline of marriage rates also effect overall societal, political, economic, educational and religious domains. For example, government laws

around family composition and child custody of non-married parents will need amendment; economic statistics on how non-married couples decide to live, whether it be together or apart, will affect their socio-economic status; the education system and how the influx of young students prioritize school over relationships impacts the age of marriage and family formation; as well as how the decline of religion in North America has weakened condoning of pre/non-marital behaviour for couples. I will discuss these aspects to a greater degree in chapter three.

Before I introduce contemporary family structures and the impact these structures and marriage rates have on society, it is necessary that I first review existing literature on the topic. After a thorough exploration of existing research I can then further investigate the gaps in knowledge, and create a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and its associated repercussions. In chapter two I provide a literature review on contemporary families and marriage. Then, in chapter three I discuss what contemporary families are comprised of and how this effects societal domains. In chapter four I then discuss the application of compiled knowledge around contemporary family structures and elaborate on the relevance this and the decline of marriage has for professional marriage and family counsellors. I conclude this thesis by discussing therapeutic intervention strategies that can be used to address related marriage and family issues.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Marriage, created and maintained by society, influences daily life of people around the world. Marriage is a contract, one that outlines expected behaviours for both partners in a legal and social regard (Family Law Act, 2015). In North America, simple changes in semantics, such as its amendment of the legal definition from “The voluntary union of man and woman to the exclusion of all others” to “The voluntary union of two persons to the exclusion of all others” (MacIntosh, Reissing, and Andruff, 2010, pp. 79; Liptak, 2015), single handedly allowed for a more diverse practice of marriage. A clear definition establishes societal rules and behaviour its inhabitants should abide by, which signifies importance to the minor details within large institutions such as marriage. The parameters involved in relationships, inclusive of marriage, are pertinent to social dynamics. Parameters such as socio-economic status, age, gender, demographic location and cultural affiliations influence the way people relate to one another. These factors influence the declining marriage rate, despite legalization of same-sex marriage to allow a greater number of the population to marry (Kalleherg, 2009), and will be discussed at greater length in chapter three.

Societal views of marriage are changing, where a majority of North American’s are viewing marriage as more of a lifestyle choice than an expected behaviour (Duncan et al., 2010). The fact that roughly one third of couples cohabitating together under the age of 35 are not married (Barlow et al., 2005) proposes that, along with declining marriages rates, societal expectations of relationships are changing. Because of this, there is a need to investigate where the trend of current relationships is heading. The main focus of chapter three is to look at how

contemporary family structures are influencing the decline of marriage rates and the impact this phenomena has on North American society.

A Brief History of Marriage

Historically, marriage crystallized through its advantages of social and economic gains (Abbott, 2010). People from lower social classes could increase their social standing by marrying someone from a higher class, as well as become wealthier through marriage to a more affluent family. Dowries were often presented to the woman's family on behalf of the husband to signify his ability to support a wife and family (Abbott, 2010).

People also saw marriage as a way a couple could form a stronger economic and domestic unit. Dictated through religious and government influence, roles for husbands and wives were established to ensure families collaborated effectively together (Abbott, 2010). Up until the 21st century, people mostly adhered to gender roles outlined in the Hebrew and Christian Bible which states that wives have a domestic duty to their husbands through a patriarchal hierarchy, while husbands have responsibility to be the bread-winner to support their family. This traditional view also saw men use marriage to achieve a state of social, financial and political adulthood (Abbott, 2010). Establishing a career and earning a decent salary enabled men to support a family, and therefore earned the privilege to marry. The reason behind this stems from the fact that in order for a man to support a family and be a good father, he must already have gained financial stability and established himself in the social and political world.

By contrast, modern women saw marriage as a way to increase their social and economic class by seducing a suitable husband to support their family (Abbott, 2010). Appearance, manners and homemaker skills were attributes most desired in women during the 20th century

(Abbott, 2010). These reasons, along with modern religious influence condoning pre-marital sex and cohabitation, made marriage appealing for couples versus the few available alternative relationship structures.

Contemporary marriage still maintains an appealing edge, but for different reasons.

Duncan, Barlow and James (2010) accurately explain this edge, stating that:

Married spouses automatically acquire: rights to reasonable financial support from their partner; occupation rights in the matrimonial home; exemption from capital gains and inheritance tax for asset transfers between each other; access to financial support on divorce or separation; joint parental responsibility; better protection from domestic violence; succession into a partners pension; and automatic entitlement into their estate on death if no will has been made. (pp. 20).

These appealing aspects are more contemporary in nature compared to those explained before the 21st-century. With clear boundaries laid out in a formal marriage contract, partners know what behaviours are allowed and discouraged. Repercussions for breaking the marriage contract are held up in court, where one partner is held accountable for their actions while the other gains privileges as the victim. Despite the trend towards marriage for the majority of the population at the turn of the 20th-century (Abbott, 2010), North American society keeps evolving its relationship practices, which, despite appealing aspects, has resulted in the contemporary context of the declining rate of marriage.

Hypotheses Behind the Decline of Marriage

Since the turn of the 21st-century, research has shown that North American citizens are less likely to marry than their older generational counterparts (Barlow et al., 2010; Geist, 2010). This

trend was noticed by researchers Lee and Payne (2010) who observed that the declining trend in marriage began after the previous generation had already married. There are many hypotheses and opinions on the reason behind this phenomena, many with sound explanations. I will discuss multiple explanations to provide readers with an understanding of current opinions; however, I will explain my opinion at the end of this section so that further discussion on the topic can occur.

The Invention of Birth Control

During the 1960's and 1970's, the advancement of contraceptive technology (e.g. The Pill) single-handedly changed dating and marriage trends in North America. Its introduction instantaneously allowed women to control their gift and ability of reproduction, which in turn empowered women to gain greater control over sexual and dating decisions. Zuppann (2012) found that in light of this invention, societies that had adequate access to birth control- as in North America – saw women have an increase number of sexual partners, lower single-motherhood rates and delayed marriage. This finding is significant to the contemporary phenomena of marriage decline. With the ability of women to control likelihood of pregnancy, despite frequency of sexual behaviour, preludes to changes in overall social behaviour. Consequently, women on birth control no longer have to caution the repercussion of pregnancy if they engage in sexual behaviour, while men may feel more protected against fatherhood responsibilities; hence, the increase number of sexual partners (Zuppann, 2012). As previously stated, marriage was required in the 20th-century as a means to copulate and start a family; however, the invention of birth control now significantly reduces the likelihood of child-birth following copulation and allows for a more diverse practice of sex and dating. Accordingly,

reasons for marriage began to diminish in light of the ability for women to control their fertility. More on this topic is discussed in chapter three.

Cohabiting before Marriage

Another leading explanation for the decline of marriage in North American is the social acceptance of non-marital cohabitation (Smock and Manning, 2004). During the 20th-century, social and religious structures condoned couples living together who were not married, which influenced people's subsequent conduct. Non-marital cohabitation was a socially sanctioned practice and thus made the desire for marriage more appealing. Couples who knew they wanted to live together may have chosen marriage as a means to achieve their desire. With postmodern changes and reforms to the degree of influence of religious and social institutions, it is currently more common that couples cohabit before marriage, or cohabit without plans for marriage: this has become the norm in North American culture (Lee and Payne, 2010).

Before the current acceptance of cohabitation before marriage, couples would live separately until they got married. Smock and Manning (2004) speculated the drastic change in living situations between living with one's parents to living with one's partner highly contributed to divorce rates. Whereas now, people can test living arrangements with their partner before marriage to see if their relationship will work after they marry. For some, society's acceptance of cohabitation without marriage is enough commitment to negate marriage altogether (Lee and Payne, 2010). This speculation is supported by a recent survey which found that many cohabiting couples believed following through with a formal marriage would have been an added expense, practical trouble and possible emotional conflict (Duncan et al., 2010).

High Divorce Rates

A common explanation for the present-day decline of marriage rates in North America is attributed to high divorce rates in previous generations (Lee and Payne, 2010). More specifically in Canada, Statistics Canada (2006) reported that upwards of 40% of first marriages end in divorce. This reality and its public knowledge is speculated to deter couples from taking part in matrimony. Divorce laws also vary between countries, which can impact a couple's decision to marry in the first place, knowing how difficult escaping legalities and financial penalties may be (Crouch and Beaulieu, 2007). Rhetorically, one might ask: Why commit to a lifelong marriage if there is a 40% chance of it failing? High divorce rates also begs the question: Why would people commit to a marriage they risk not being able to maintain? One can ponder these questions and create their own opinion on why people marry if they so quickly divorce.

Glass and Levchak (2014) found that religious conservatism positively relates to divorce rates, as religion advocates marriage before copulation and cohabitation. However, young-aged couples are statistically more likely to divorce than more mature couples, and thus makes religious conservative couples at a disadvantage to successful marriages (Glass and Levchak, 2014). Despite this statistic, divorce rates are currently plateauing in North America, which is speculated to be a result of the increase use of birth control and the repercussion of people delaying marriage until a more mature age (Zuppann, 2012).

Devaluing the Institution of Marriage

A potentially controversial perspective on the decline of marriage involves cultural changes in North American society. One may argue that these changes have diminished the value people place on marriage, as well as families; meanwhile increasingly emphasizing western

values of individualism and the satisfaction of attaining his/her immediate needs and desires (Lee and Payne, 2010). This change in the North American value system could mean that society no longer believes marriage is valuable: marriage does not serve an important societal purpose. As previously stated, couples are choosing to delay or negate marriage to pursue other life milestones such as education and career. North American culture has decreased priority of marriage and families, turning alternative relationships into the foremost family structures (Lee and Payne, 2010). In fact, upwards of 50% of cohabitating couples view common-law relationships as equal to marriage (Duncan et al., 2010). From a legal standpoint, this belief is false as factual evidence proves common-law and marriage relationships are not treated equally in the legal system (Duncan et al., 2010). This misconception of common-law and marriage seen equally within the law is said to be “irrational and incompetent” (Duncan et al., 2010, pp. 11) but nonetheless has contributed to diminishing marriage values that previous centuries had for certain benefits (e.g. division of belongings). Further discussion on common-law/alternative relationships will occur in chapter three.

Societal Repercussions

There are more hypotheses for the reasons behind the decline in marriage rates, but the extent goes beyond the scope of this paper. Due to the nature of the institution of marriage, the unification of a social and legal partnership, both social and government domains are effected by its decline. Changes in the definition of marriage, as previously mentioned, as well as more current amendments to the Family Law Act in 2013 (e.g. places the safety and best interests of the child(ren) first when families go through separation and divorce, clarifies parental responsibilities and the division of assets upon relationships dissolution, addresses violence within families and encourages families to resolve their disputes out of court) have impacted

North American society's response to marriage. These amendments within a marriage contract influence parenting styles and financial management. Such aspects cause repercussions throughout different domains of society and are important to analyze when addressing struggles people encounter within their marriage and family.

Questions arise while exploring the changing trend in marriage. As relationships and family life transitions away from 20th-century tradition towards 21st-century diversity, there is curiosity around reasons people still strive for marriage and what benefits being married brings. How does this reflect current North American trends in relationships? And what results from the evolution of relationships? More so, I am curious to investigate the overall impact contemporary family structures has on the decline of marriage rates and how North American society is responding. This knowledge will help marriage and family counsellors, through psycho-education, to help their client's accept and normalize presenting issues. I contend that along with the recently discussed hypotheses on the decline of marriage, another leading factor contributing to the decline of marriage rates is the change in contemporary family structures. This change, which will be discussed in the next chapter, mitigates the value of marriage and impacts different domains of society.

Evolving Marriage Trends

Research on evolving marriage trends show that those who do get married, more often than not, are doing so later in life (Lee and Payne, 2010). As of 2010, the average age for North American women to marry is 26, and age 28 for men, compared to age 20 and 23 respectively in 1970 (Lee and Payne, 2010). This belief is a result of the increase in couple's pre-marital cohabitation (Smock and Manning, 2004), which is now the modal first union for young couples (Guzzo, 2014). Without the taboo of pre-marital cohabitation, copulation and ability to control

fertility, couples no longer feel pressured to get married before living together (Lee and Payne, 2010). As mentioned earlier, couples may find living together before marriage enables the decision whether or not to pursue marriage. Living together in a committed but non-marital relationship may be sufficient for couples who prioritize other life aspects over marriage.

North American society has also been placing greater emphasis on its members to pursue a higher education. Lee and Payne (2010) found that attaining post-secondary education delayed the focus of couples getting married as well beginning a family. This idea has led to established research showing there is not only a decline in rates of marriage but also a delay in those who do choose to marry. Cahn and Carbone (2010) found that couples with higher education who get married later in life tend to have lower divorce rates and also produce less offspring. Conversely, young couples with lower education tend to have higher divorce rates and produce more offspring (Cahn and Carbone, 2010). Chapter three will discuss this matter further.

The relationship between age, education, and marriage can best be explained by looking into contemporary family structures and its many effects on North American society. Beyond the traditional family structure extends discussion into alternative relationships. Because relationship structure effects societal aspects, I believe it is useful to investigate these structure in order to better understand contemporary partnership.

Alternative Relationships to Marriage

As oppose to marriage, people are spending more time in committed but non-marital relationships (Pastore, 2011). In light of this, new definitions of relationships have been developed, bridging relationship statuses between singlehood and married life. The most liberally used term to define a committed but non-marital relationship is *common-law*. A

common law relationship is comprised of two people living in a marriage-like relationship for a certain amount of time, usually between one and two years (Legal Services Society, 2015). In fact, this new relationship status is growing four times faster than the rate of marriage (Beresford, 2013). This information highlights current changes in relationship trends and brings awareness to postmodern society in regards to relationship practices. However prominent common-law relationships occur over marriage, there are other alternative relationships worthy of noting.

Looking at Pastore's (2011) article, "The New Lexicon of Love," there are new statuses and definitions for contemporary relationships. These relationships are alternatives to the traditional relationship statuses of single, married, divorced or widowed. The traditional dichotomy of relationships to be either committed or platonic was weakened by the decrease of social and religious influence which allowed for a more diverse practice of relationships (Smock and Manning, 2004). Below is a direct quote from his article that defines what Pastore (2011) believes to be new relationship statuses by definition:

Stayover Relationship: noun. A committed, monogamous partnership, usually between college students, in which the couple sleeps together three or more nights every week—sometimes all seven—but doesn't live together or necessarily plan to in the future.

Stayover relationships breed comfort and convenience as a couple without sacrificing independence.

LAT: noun. "Living Apart Together" A committed relationship in which members maintain separate residences. They don't spend the night together frequently enough to be

considered stayover. LAT pairs tend to be older divorcees who have kids and don't want to uproot their lives by combining their homes.

LTA: noun. "Living Together Apart." A domestic relationship in which two people who have children together continue to cohabit after the romantic connection has ended. LTA couples are usually low-income and urban, and during times of high unemployment, one parent may move in to care for the kids while the other works. The reasons women give for being in an LTA are similar to pre-20th-century reasons for marriage: shared parenthood and pooled resources, rather than sex and love. (pp.1)

These new, formal relationship statuses, along with common-law, impact the decline of marriage rates and are a product of contemporary family structures. Contemporary relationships are not black and white, as in people are not either single or married, or divorced or widowed. Creating formal statuses to label alternative relationships helps people establish roles and expected behaviours that coincide with their relational dynamic. By this I mean that if a couple agrees to being in an LTA relationship, both partners know that their cohabitation is simply for financial or parenting purposes, and therefore are not required to fake the showing of inauthentic emotional engagement in the relationship. I speculate that when couples agree to a relationship status it clarifies how they will behave and interact with one another, reducing arguments around unclear boundaries.

For counselling professionals, understanding current relationship statuses/trends and its impact on the decline of marriage rates can help educate client's to better understand their presenting marriage and family issues. As previously stated, changes in contemporary relationships effect aspects of North American society and are seen in in subsequent conduct.

Conclusion

Looking through the history of marriage and the hypotheses of its decline, there is clarity in areas where new relationship trends begin to emerge. Where once appealing aspects to the institution of marriage swept over society (e.g. ability to cohabit with one's partner or engage in sexual relations), they now appear irrelevant. Contemporary relationships are now branching into several accepted forms, each earning new statuses and definitions. In the next chapter I will discuss contemporary family structures, their role in the decline of marriage rates and how the domains within society are impacted accordingly.

CHAPTER THREE: CONTEMPORARY FAMILY STRUCTURES AND REPERCUSSIONS ON SOCIETY

Introduction

Recent changes to legalize same-sex marriage in the United States indicate the growing acceptance of diverse relationships in North America (Liptak, 2015). Although what percentage of the population is aware that marriage rates are currently declining is unknown, governments have made policy amendments based on this decline (which will be discussed later in this chapter). As marriage rates have declined, an increasing number of children have been born to couples in non-traditional relationships (Lee and Payne, 2010). The number of children born out-of-wedlock is increasing despite the widespread availability of birth control, which has contributed to the higher proportion of single-parent headed families in North America (Haskins, 2015). As of June 2015, same-sex North American citizens have the same right to marry as heterosexual citizens (Liptak, 2015), which supports the idea that contemporary North American family structures have changed significantly in the past century (Abbott, 2010).

In this chapter, I will focus on investigating how changes in contemporary family structures have contributed to declining marriage rates as well as highlight the subsequent repercussions of these changes on society. This investigation will not only shed light on the changes, but will also examine how they impact people's daily lives and different domains of society (e.g. how new family structures affect the political, educational, economical, religious and social dimensions of society). I am interested in the structure of contemporary families in general and specifically interested in single-parent headed families, since they have a higher prevalence than traditional families in North America (Beresford, 2013). In my view, the changes in contemporary North American family structures are indicative of the direction society

is going in and changes in people's day-to-day lives. Activism and lobbying by North American citizens and organizations contributed to constitutional changes in government law around the legalization of same-sex marriage (Liptak, 2015). Now, all North American citizens have the right to marry someone of their same sex. Further, the prevalence of high divorce rates has led to an increased number of single-parent families, which has forced many single parents to assume a dual parenting role which significantly increases the likelihood they will live in poverty (Walker, et al., 2008).

I will begin this chapter by looking into the background of the traditional family structure. Then I will discuss the alternative family structures that exist today and look into the repercussions that the transition to alternative family structures has had on various aspects of society. I will conclude the chapter with a summary of central themes and findings.

The Traditional Family

The traditional family is defined as a family composed of a biological male parent and a biological female parent who live together in a marital relationship (Fonteboa, 2013) with their biological children; no other relatives share the household. (Demo, Aquilino and Fine, 2005).

During the past 30 years the traditional family has no longer been the predominant North American family structure (Hazlett, 2014). Although traditional families are seen as ideal, the composition of North American families has become increasingly diverse (Demo, et al., 2005). This is evident in statistics showing that less than 50% of North American children live in what society would consider to be a traditional family (Brandon and Bumpass, 2001). These statistics indicate that the other 50% (approximately) are growing up in alternative families.

The Rise of Alternative Family Structures

In previous chapters, I have examined declining marriage rates and increasing divorce rates (Lee and Payne, 2010). It is salient to note that as of 2011, 36% of babies born annually in North America were born to couples who were not married (Cancian and Haskins, 2014). These and other statistics signify the social trend of North Americans choosing to form alternative rather than traditional families. To remain relevant, researchers have had to define these new family structures, which are generally termed a *nontraditional family*. This term is defined as “a family that is not comprised in its entirety by two biological parents, one male one female, and cohabitating in a marital relationship” (Fonteboa, 2013, pp. 3). It is easier to define nontraditional families in terms of what they are not, as this broadens the types of composition that characterizes these families. The alternative families I will discuss in this thesis include same-sex, single-parent and blended families. I will emphasize single-parent families because they have a higher prevalence rate than all of the other family structures (Haskins, 2015).

Same-sex Marriage and Families

Same-sex marriage has only been legal in Canada since 2005 (CBC News, 2012). It became legal in the United States on June 26th, 2015 (Liptak, 2015). Consequently, there is less research on same-sex families than single-parent headed families. However, research on declining marriages rates generates insight into how the same-sex family structure impacts society.

Rostosky and Riggle (2015) stated that same-sex couples have relationships similar to different-sex couples. Partners in any committed relationship have to establish trust, support one another to adjust to different life circumstances, and resolve conflicts (Rostosky and Riggle,

2015). However, one key difference between the two types of couples is that same-sex couples may be faced with stigmatization and discrimination because they constitute a minority relationship structure that is not seen as acceptable to some members of society (Rostosky and Riggle, 2015). The legalization of same-sex marriage in North America has raised hope that negative perceptions of same-sex couples will change, and that these couples will receive more acceptance in society and be seen as equal to different-sex couples.

Successful activism and lobbying (Liptak, 2015) has led governments to amend laws in order to accommodate the alternative relationship structure of same-sex couples. Both Canada (CBC News, 2012) and the United States have had to rewrite their Constitution in order to legalize same-sex marriages and families, and this has had significant repercussions within society. Those members of the general public who view same-sex couples as unacceptable may also believe that it is unacceptable for same-sex couples to become parents. However, Ball (2014, pp.4) has found that “biological status or parental gender” does not affect adults’ ability to parent, which indicates that same-sex couples can parent as well (or badly) as different-sex couples. Research also shows that children who grow up in same-sex families are just as psychologically, socially and academically adjusted as children who grow up in traditional families (Titlestad and Pooley, 2014; Potter, 2012). These findings have important implications for the social and educational domains of society. Given that children are not negatively impacted by having same-sex parents rather than different-sex parents, the school system does not have to implement specific educational interventions for the children of same-sex parents, beyond promoting acceptance of them (Titlestad and Pooley, 2014). Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for children from single-parent and blended families.

Single-Parent Families

Single-parent headed families are the most common alternative family structure in North America and these families are predominantly headed by heterosexual women (Haskins, 2015). Marriage rates are declining and although birth rates remain steady, the existing birth rate indicates that an increasing number of women are giving birth out-of-wedlock – despite having access to various forms of birth control (Cancian and Haskins, 2014). There are many reasons for this social phenomena. It is in part due to a lack of pressure to get married as well as an acceptance of pre-marital sex and cohabitation that extends to social institutions and even many religious institutions (Cahn and Carbone, 2010). This

In addition, before the 20th century, government laws strongly favored single mothers or divorced mothers in terms of giving them sole guardianship of their children and granted fathers basic visiting rights under the “Tender Years Doctrine” (Stevenson, 2013, pp. 1). This doctrine stated that women have a greater capacity over men to take care of children and should therefore be granted child custody when they do not live with their male partner or separate from their male partner (Stevenson, 2013). As Stevenson (2013) notes, it became a social norm for mothers to gain custody of their children following a divorce.

Religious institutions also favored giving child custody to women because up until the 20th-century they shared the view that women were best suited to the roles of mother and homemaker, while their husbands went to work to provide for the family (Abbott, 2010). It therefore made logical sense that gender roles would stay the same if a couple divorced, with children continuing to live with their mothers and fathers continuing to provide for their wives and children through alimony and child support. Gender roles have shifted (Dust, 1995) in modern times, with an increasing number of women attaining higher education and participating

in the workplace (Lee and Payne, 2010). Accordingly, the traditional view of women has changed. In the 1960s, society's perspective of child custody began shifting away from the ideals of the Tender Years Doctrine to favor of what was best for the child (Stevenson, 2013). This was reflected in the development of the Best Interest of the Child Standard (BIS), which is currently used in legal custody battles (Stevenson, 2013).

It might be best for children to live with their father, one member of a same-sex couple, or other legal guardian. Single-father headed families are less common than single-mother headed families, constituting one of every five single-parent households. However, society is more accepting of the single-father headed family than it was 30 years ago and religious institutions are not judging single fathers as negatively as they once did (Bradley, 2013; Cahn and Carbone, 2010). Although joint custody is common for roughly 70% of couples who separate (Chen, 2015), the single-mother headed family remains the most common family structure (Haskins, 2015). On some occasions new members join single parent families, such as new partners who become non-biological parents to the children. These partners have the ability to gain guardianship of the children according to certain legal criteria (Family Law Act, 2015), but lack the full status accorded to biological parents because the longevity of their relationship is unpredictable. This subject will be discussed in greater detail later in the thesis.

Blended Families

When a single parent begins to date, she or he may form a new partnership that brings an additional member/additional members into the family structure. This new partner may be single with no children, in which case he or she is a singular addition to a single-parent household. However, a growing number of single parents marry a new spouse who has a child/children (Demo, et al., 2005). When these single-parents decide to cohabitate or get married, they create

what is called a *blended family*. Oxford (2015) defines a blended family as “a family consisting of a couple, the children they have had together, and their children they have had from previous relationships.” The formation of this contemporary family structure seems quite natural in light of the repercussions of divorce and the likelihood of single parents forming intimate bonds with people they date.

Family dynamics in contemporary North American society have clearly evolved from traditional families to alternative families. When a traditional marriage fails and a couple separates, one or two single-parent headed families are created. These single parents find new partners who will become a step-parent/guardian to their children if the couple decides to get married. If the new partners have children of their own, their marriage to other single-parents creates blended families with step-parents and step-siblings (Family Law Act, 2015). Although this is not a new phenomenon, it is interesting to map the development of alternative families and consider how the behaviours associated with these families impact society.

The Repercussions of Alternative Family Structures

Striving for the Ideal Family

Changing family structures have had numerous repercussions on North American society. However, these repercussions can be divided into two primary categories: external and internal effects. External effects are the structural, behavioural and overt repercussions that changing family dynamics have on various aspects of society. Internal effects are the emotional and psychological impacts that alternative families have on individuals. I will discuss these two categories interchangeably in the next section in order to provide a comprehensive and foundational understanding of how alternative relationships affect North American society.

Some people argue that the traditional family structure is a benchmark for a happy and healthy family life (Coleman et al., 2000). A study conducted by Mackey and Immerman (2009) found that traditional families had significant advantages in society over single-parent households, but equal advantages in comparison to same-sex families – despite the risk for stigmatization and discrimination faced by same-sex families (Rostosky and Riggle, 2015). The reasons for this vary, but one particularly relevant reason is the fact that traditional family structures have less conflict and instability than single-parent family structures, as well as higher levels of connectedness and social control (Cavanagh, 2008). When family members have minimal conflict and a healthy sense of belonging, they are better able to enjoy time together, which increases their overall happiness and sense of well-being. Studies that have compared family structures support this claim, and have found that traditional and single-parent family structures have different destabilizing factors (external factors) and different psychological and emotional impacts (internal factors) (Cavanagh, 2008; Mackey and Immerman, 2009; Coleman et al., 2000; Turunen, 2014; Borrine et al., 1991). In the next section I will explain these correlations and shed light on how the related issues are effecting contemporary North American society.

External Repercussions

Transitioning between family structures – from married, to single-parent, to blended family – has become increasingly more prevalent throughout the lifetimes of individual North Americans (Cavanagh, 2008). Consequently, certain stabilizing factors are disrupted. Cavanagh (2008) emphasized that stabilizing factors (e.g. the number of relatives living together, who is living together, and the location of the family residence) play an important role in determining the amount and severity of the negative consequences that family structures have on family

members. When a couple separates, individuals often have to relocate and adapt to new living environments. Both parents and children can adapt to their new lifestyle either positively or negatively. Cavanagh (2008) found that when couples who were divorcing experienced high levels of dispute and conflict, they and their children were likely to have difficulty adapting to their new living environment. More on this will be discussed below. On the contrary, parents and children who had the support of family members and friends when the parents separated were seen to more successfully adjust to their new family structure (Mackey and Immerman, 2009).

Looking at the impact family transitions have on individuals is important to identifying links between stressful experiences and negative outcomes for both parents and children. When family structures and living arrangements become more fluid and complex, it can become more difficult for members to adapt to those arrangements (Cavanagh, 2008). The external effect of multiple and potentially complex transitions – which occur when families frequently relocate and/or children live with different family members for periods of time – plays a role in a family's overall well-being. For example, children may experience maladaptation when they have to adjust to new living conditions because they lack control over those conditions (Amato, 2000). Children of divorcing or divorced parents have little say in where they live or with whom they live, which is even more difficult if separating couples are in continual conflict. It is speculated that such circumstances cause children's overall well-being to decrease and contribute to behavioural problems (Webster-Stratton, 2012), low academic achievement, and socialization issues (Malecki and Elliot, 2002). Other factors that affect children's well-being when they transition through parental divorces include experiencing more negative life events, social isolation, and exposure to difficult parenting environments (Amato, 2000).

Amato (2000) found that children from alternative families – excluding same-sex families – scored lower in categories of academic achievement, psychological adjustment, social competence, social conduct and physical health, which reinforces the notion that traditional families are the benchmark of happiness and well-being. Adolescents from blended families appear to earn lower grades than those who do not have step-siblings (Turunen, 2014), and children from both blended and single-parent headed families who perceive high levels of family conflict experience poorer adjustment in later life (Borrine et al., 1991; Cavanagh, 2008). These facts indicate that alternative family structures have significant repercussions on society. Knowing that the members of single parent and blended families find family transitions more stressful than the members of traditional families draws public attention to the negative outcomes that the former may experience. This knowledge will help marriage and family counsellors to better understand some clients' situations and offer useful strategies for preventing and treating problems related to being part of an alternative family structure.

Research indicates that in contrast to children from single parent and blended families, children from same-sex families did not score differently than children from traditional families in the previously mentioned categories of academic achievement, social competence and psychological adjustment (Titlestad and Pooley, 2014; Potter, 2012). This exception was attributed to same-sex families having “unique advantages and emphasizing the importance of secure, loving relationships within their family” (Titlestad and Pooley, 2014, pp.11). In addition, it was suggested that same-sex couples had more successful marriages, less conflict, and experienced fewer transitions than couples who divorced or remarried.

Other external factors that affect families include social views of divorce (Demo et al., 2005) and social expectations for how families should adapt to the changes caused by divorce. I

reference social learning theory – which states that people will tend to think and behave in the most socially acceptable ways – (Chavis, 2012) in asserting that the feelings and behaviours of individuals who divorce are largely influenced by social expectations. Because divorce rates are relatively high – about 40% of first marriages in North America end in divorce (Lee and Payne, 2010) – divorce has become socially normalized. This normalization may minimize negative responses to divorce and enhance the support available to couples who divorce and their children. Cavanagh (2008) and Mackey and Immerman (2009) found that individuals who experience a change in family structure due to divorce need support to help them adapt to their new lifestyle, regardless of how frequent the incidence of divorce is demographically.

Coleman et al. (2000) revealed that children who experience parental divorce experience more external and internal problems, which can lead to negative consequences such as acting-out behaviours, depression and an increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Coleman et al., 2000). Webster-Stratton (2012) found that youth will act out in order to gain more attention from their parents. The more distracted a parent becomes when a family transitions, the harder a child must work to get her or his attention. Because it is easier for a child/youth to attain negative attention (i.e. through acting out), children can exhibit escalating behaviour (i.e. tantrums) or get in trouble at school in order to get the attention they seek from their parents (Webster-Stratton, 2012). This in turn increases conflict in a family and effects family members' overall well-being.

Age and gender also have an influence on how children and youth respond when they have to adjust to changing family dynamics. The likelihood of experiencing emotional distress due to changing family dynamics is highest for adolescents and is predicted by marijuana use (Cavanagh, 2008). Brown (2010) views marijuana use as a negative-attention seeking behaviour and a coping mechanism for adolescents who are unable to adapt to their family changes. Preteen

boys were found to experience a disruption in their romantic lives more significantly than preteen girls during periods of family instability (Cavanagh et al., 2008). The direct reason for this finding was not mentioned. In addition, Laursen (2005) found that adolescents tend to engage in verbal conflicts more frequently with single-parent mothers than mothers in traditional, blended and same-sex families. One hypothesis attributes this to the fact that a high number of single-parent families are headed by women (Haskins, 2015). Research comparing verbal conflicts in male-headed and female-headed single parent families would strengthen or counter this assertion.

The high incidence of single-parent headed families has major societal repercussions, particularly given that there has been a significant increase in these types of families (Haskins, 2015). Research shows that families headed by a single mother are at a greater risk of living in poverty (Haskins, 2015). This may be in part because the father of the children provides minimal to no support (physically or financially) and made no legal commitment to do so through marriage. Another reason single mothers may struggle economically is because taking care of their children makes it difficult for them to manage work responsibilities. However, North American male single parents also struggle to maintain a full-time job when they are required to adequately care for a child/children (Walker, et al., 2008). This is what Walker et al. (2008) refer to as “time poverty,” which means there is simply not enough time for a single parent to both earn a livable salary and take care of a family.

It should also be noted that both men and women heading single-parent households are more likely to experience financial debt because they lack the support of a working spouse (Bradley, 2013). Although being a single-parent has not limited the earning capacities of parents who have obtained a Bachelors or higher degree, income levels for both men and women appear

to have declined (Cancian and Haskins, 2014). This in itself is a social phenomenon that requires society's attention, as stagnating incomes have repercussions that occur in tandem with marriage difficulties and changing family structures.

When parents prefer to work part-time in order to manage their childcare responsibilities, it can be difficult to find a part-time job that pays well, and it is often a struggle for families to survive on a part-time salary (Walker et al., 2008). Children and youth are also aware when their family is in a situation of financial instability. In such situations, they recognize that living in poverty can exclude them from friendships with certain people as well as involvement in sports and community activities (Walker, et al., 2008). In fact, children from poverty-stricken families are half as likely to engage in extracurricular activities as their more affluent counterparts (Hanes, 2015). Although the repercussions of this reality are very important, examining them is beyond the scope of this thesis.

It is important for society to recognize the effects that living in poverty has on single-parent families. This will help to shed light on the support and resources that poor families need. For example, single-parent families may benefit from food banks in their area and need access to affordable child-care services. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, as knowledge of the impacts that poverty has on single-parent families will encourage adaptations and reforms in various societal domains (e.g. government, economic and social).

Effects on Economy, Government, and Education

The fact that many single-parent families live in poverty (Haskins, 2015) directly impacts the economy, government and education. Families who live below the poverty line spend less on goods and services, which directly effects the North American economy and can lower our

economic position in the world. Consumer spending drives the economy (Ponnuru, 2014), but is constrained when single parents struggle to work full-time while taking care of children.

Canadian and American governments can therefore stimulate their economies by supporting single-parent families with relevant resources and assistance.

The impacts of an under-stimulated economy are such that they warrant government intervention (Ponnuru, 2014). More families living at, or below, the poverty line are in need of housing subsidies, tax credits and social services to subsidize their living expenses (Ponnuru, 2014). This is taxing for the government, and can contribute to the accumulation of long-term national debt. More national debt means higher taxes are needed to pay off the debt, which comes full circle back to the difficulty that poverty-stricken families have paying more taxes. I therefore suggest that government policies should tailor certain tax credits and living subsidies specifically to single-parent families.

A lack of finances also inhibits parents' capacity to afford higher education for their children. Tuition fees have almost doubled in the past 20 years and continue to rise (McArdle, 2012), so paying for post-secondary education has become increasingly more difficult. Even though the number of North Americans attending post-secondary education has increased (Lee and Payne, 2010), students coming from low-income families – many of whom live with single-parents – must rely heavily on student loans and lines of credit (McArdle, 2012). Having to pay these loans off can become a barrier to financial stability for university or college graduates and their debt can be passed on through generations if successful interventions are not provided.

In addition, the economic demand for more tech-savvy workers (Tambe and Hitt, 2014) has forced youth to become more highly educated. Students not only have to deal with the cost attached to paying for post-secondary education, but also have to make a time commitment to

attain that education. A primary reason why North Americans are marrying at a later age is that youth are staying in school longer (Cahn and Carbone, 2010). Education and career goals are more of a priority than marriage for the upcoming generation, which is pushing the age of marriage ahead (Lee and Payne, 2010). The prioritization of education over marriage also has resulted in two significant societal changes: a decrease in the number of children that some couples are having, and a decrease in the rising divorce rate, although they generally remain high (Cahn and Carbone, 2010). Cahn and Carbone (2010) attribute this to the substantial time commitment that individuals in couples have made to their careers in addition to an increase in couples' maturity level.

The negative repercussions of single-headed families extend beyond the increasing likelihood of poverty and difficulty coping with social pressure to provide children with an expensive higher education. Haskins (2015) noted that children reared in single-parent headed families are more likely to display "suboptimal development" and behavioural problems than children raised in traditional and same-sex families. One explanation for these outcomes is the quality and amount of resources that single parents are able to give their children. Single parents commonly have less money to spend on material goods, live in lower-income school districts, and have less available time to give their children (du Toit et al., 2014).

North American school systems already experience issues with respect to dealing with children who display behavioural problems, which, is in turn correlated with increased rates of teacher turnover (Tsouloupas, 2010). Addressing how these children develop behavioural problems (e.g. living through a divorce or having difficulties due to being raised by a single-parent) will help educational institutions to mitigate the prevalence of these problems. Governments can also provide schools with funds to hire more support staff to assist students

with learning or behavioural problems, especially in low-income neighborhoods. Webster-Stratton (2012) found that the younger a child is when a behavioural intervention is introduced, the higher the likelihood that the child will respond positively to the intervention. When children correct their behavioural issues, they will be less distracted from learning and more likely to reach standard developmental milestones. In addition, receiving adequate support in school will help diminish the repercussions that may occur for children who are raised by single parents.

Although there is a lack of consensus about how effectively school interventions inhibit the negative repercussions of behaviour issues, the notion that providing children with the support they need will serve the betterment of overall society is not so far-fetched. Small forms of support, such as providing more government assistance to single-parents living in poverty and reducing the teacher-to-child ratios in schools, can provide significant benefits for those parents (e.g. smoother life transitions, less “time poverty” (Walker, et al., 2008)(Francis, 2015). I highly encourage the government to more thoroughly investigate efficient interventions for single-parent headed families. There is particular need for interventions that provide financial and professional support, which can mitigate poverty for single-parent headed families and address behavioural problems among children/youth before they develop into larger issues.

It should also be noted that North American society is experiencing greater diversity in parenting, caregiving resources, and child development due to the increase in single-parent families (du Toit et al., 2014). With few exceptions, this diversity is strongest amongst low-income households. In the United States, 12% of households include grandparents, adult siblings and extended family members (American Community Survey, 2009). This visible, external manifestation of changing family structures reflects a reshaping of the traditional family. In a

traditional family, the role of grandparent, parent and child are all clearly defined, but these roles may be blurred or more flexible in single-parent and blended families.

The higher incidence of single-mother headed families in contemporary North American society has resulted in an increase of grandmothers who help their daughters raise their children. These grandparents often step into the role of a second parent because it is difficult for the mother to financially support her children along with supervising and caring for them (Walker et al., 2008; de Toledo and Brown, 2013). This adds complexity to family dynamics in many ways. The grandmother may assume the role of parent because she is retired and has time to supervise the children while their mother goes to work (de Toledo and Brown, 2013). Children brought up in this type of family structure may experience more family dysfunction due to the fact that they are raised according to two different generational styles of parenting. Research finds that the more complex family dynamics become, the more difficult it is for families to function optimally (Hazlett, 2014). Hazlett (2014) further suggests that the more complex and dysfunctional a family is, the more likely it is for children to experience behavioural problems.

On a positive note, the consequences of growing up in single-parent and blended families are less negative than they were 30 years ago (Demo et al., 2005). This can be attributed to society's greater acceptance of divorce and single-parent families, which was prompted by significant increases in divorce rates in the 1970's (Pachler, 2014). Divorce has become a norm in North American culture, which has mitigated the negative judgements of divorce that prevailed in earlier times (Pachler, 2014). Nonetheless, children who transition through the multiple living situations that are common to single-parent and blended families still display a poorer overall ability to adjust in comparison to children from traditional families (Hazlett, 2014). The same cannot be said about children who have two parents of the same sex, as they are

reported to adjust well to life circumstances or changes because they have a stable living environment (Titlestad and Pooley, 2014). This suggests that children who go through multiple life transitions adjust more poorly to life circumstances and that those who experience few to no transitions have better life adjustment abilities. In addition, difficult family transitions not only manifest as maladjustment in children, but have negative internal repercussions for adults.

Internal Repercussions

The state of mental health is in question when there is disturbances in the family unit. When family members experience conflict and multiple transitions, personal well-being becomes challenged. One study found that in single-parent families in particular, roughly 10% of youth suffered from some form of mental health issue (Jianxun, Jianjun and Fuqiang, 2003). This fact signifies the internal repercussions many youth internalize as a result of complex and often negative family experiences, such as divorce.

The most commonly diagnosed mental health disorder is depression (Jianxun, Jianjun and Fuqiang, 2003). Within North American, depression has a 6% lifelong prevalence rate and an estimated 30% of children experience a depressive episode by the time they reach adolescence (Collins et al., 2004). This indicates a need for researchers to investigate the links between depression, the decline of marriage rates, and changes to contemporary family structures. As stated, North American society has seen a rise in alternative family structures due to declining marriage rates, which have changed family dynamics, and increased the complexity of families. Changes to family dynamics and family complexity can have negative repercussions because they result in more difficulties in life for both parents and children (e.g. the emotional drain of living in poverty and the stress of single parenting). Many researchers have supported this claim

in finding a strong correlation between negative family experiences and depressive symptoms (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2015).

To the contrary, these same researchers found that depressive symptoms amongst the members of alternative families were fewer when the family size was larger, which may be the case for blended families (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2015). However, Roberts, Povich and Mather's (2012) found that the larger the family, the more serious the financial challenges they are likely to face. This is because raising a child is expensive and the cost is prohibitive to North Americans who earn an average income. An increasing number of couples are choosing to be child-free, and the expense of raising children may factor into this decision (Carlson, 2005). Declining birth rates in some segments of North American society may reflect declining marriage rates, as starting a family is a common reason why couples choose to marry (Lee and Payne, 2010)

Conclusion

Looking at the growing commonality of alternative family structures is indicative of the diversity that characterizes contemporary North American families and society. However, this diversity has clear and evident repercussions.

Research supports my contention that having the option of forming family structures that are alternatives to the traditional arrangement is a predominant reason for the decline of marriage rates. The increasing prevalence of single-parent headed households has created changes within society such as new government policies and the provision of more educational and social support for children with behavioural issues. It is important that the general population to be aware of these changes and the repercussions of alternative family structures. This

awareness is essential to the betterment of society and will help individuals to recognize the various factors that are involved when they make significant life-changing decisions (e.g. getting married or choosing to divorce). Sharing information about family structures and the ramifications associated with them should become a priority for marriage and family counsellors who work with clients who present family-related issues and want to set goals that will impact their family. Educating clients about current relationship trends and challenges will hopefully enable them to think clearly and in-depth about important life decisions. This in turn will help them to cope with family complexity and the multiple transitions they may have to adjust to due to family-related life changes.

This chapter has explored contemporary family structures and their impact on North American society. Chapter Four, the last chapter, will discuss ways to prevent and address these issues within a counselling paradigm. The chapter aims to prompt dialogue about what specific counselling strategies and interventions would be well-suited to addressing issues such as marital discord, attachment issues, misbehaviour and violence among children, problems related to teenagers, and parenting strategies.

CHAPTER FOUR: APPLICATION TO MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELLING AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed contemporary family structures and its relation to declining marriage rates and societal repercussions, I will now discuss how this information is valuable and useful for marriage and family counsellors. My goal in doing this stems from the need for more competent and informed counsellors who treat marriage and family issues, as currently there is a lack of formal training (Stith, 2014). The information is available; however, the training is not being provided. The purpose of this chapter is to inform counsellors about various family intervention strategies without having to research extensively on their own.

The Association of Marital and Family Regulatory Board (AMFRB) has found that majority of marriage and family counsellors are older adult, female therapists who operate through private practice and most commonly see individual clients (Bradley, 2010). This demographic of counsellors may be a result of AMFRB's comprehensive licensing examination as a requisite to practicing as a registered Marriage and Family Counsellor (MFC) (Bradley, 2010), or perhaps it is the niche these counsellors prefer at that time during their career. Because North America has a diverse population, one must recognize that an older female therapist working in private practice may not be a good fit for all clients. Ideally, marriage and family counselling would have a diverse population of professional counsellors who operate in various environments. This notion has prompted chapter four to discuss marriage and family counselling strategies and interventions that all counsellors may use for their clients related issues.

The diverse population in North America suggests counsellors practice therapy with multicultural sensitivity (Guanipa, 2003). Multicultural sensitivity entails counselling through respect to client's cultural and religious background and dismissing personal opinions on related topics. Regardless of the age, gender, or mode of therapy, understanding and accepting a client's culture is pertinent for building rapport (Guanipa, 2003) which is paramount to achieving therapeutic success (Tandos and Stukas, 2010).

Along with multicultural sensitivity, research shows that more inclusive, community-based therapeutic interventions are most useful in marriage and family counselling than the more commonly practiced one on one therapy (Bradley, 2010; Fletcher, et al., 2013). The benefits of inclusive, community-based interventions are especially true for single-parent families who live below the poverty line and need resources above and beyond counselling strategies (Haskins, 2015). More on interventions for single-parent families will be discussed in a later section; however, I introduce this information to prelude into the next sections of this chapter, which is an overview and explanation why the information gathered in chapter three is useful for professional counsellors. I then discuss marriage and family intervention strategies counsellors may use to adapt to contemporary family structures.

Overview of Information Gathered in Chapter Three

In chapter three I discussed how North America is trending away from the traditional family structure towards the more prevalent alternative family structures such as single-parent, same-sex, and blended. The lack of religious influence on everyday life in North America (Cahn and Carbone, 2010), along with activism and lobbying for same-sex marriage rights (Liptak, 2015), has influenced government legislator to make amendments with regards to these changes.

The Family Law Act (2015) was amended to incorporate common-law marriage, in addition to changes created as a result of the legalization of same-sex marriages (CBC News, 2012).

With the prevalence of alternative families outnumbering traditional families, there is a growing acceptance of these predominant family structures, along with the relationships that prelude them (Bradley, 2010). These alternative relationships effect society and result in both positive and negative repercussions. Along with traditional families, same-sex families appear to have well-adjusted children and are comparable to the “happy benchmark” their different-sex family’s experience (Rostosky and Riggle, 2015). Alternatively, single-parent and blended families who experience complex and often multiple transitions are more likely to experience family dysfunction which results in more poorly-adjusted children (Cavanagh, 2008). Research has also found that family instability factors contribute to emotional and behavioural disturbances which this chapter plans to address (Cavanagh, 2008; Amato, 2000; Turunen, 2014).

Chapter three illustrated contemporary marriage and families issues to provide counsellors with insight into their client’s related problems. Looking at factors that make traditional and same-sex families happy and functioning well (e.g. stability, few complex transitions and adequate income) may foreshadow goals which struggling families may strive to achieve. Knowing that poverty, experienced by many single-parent families (Haskins, 2015), leads to negative outcomes such as stress and exclusion from friend groups and community involvement (Walker, et al., 2008), may draw attention to solution-focused goals in counselling. For example, a single-parent client who operates below the poverty line may need counselling in areas of stress-management and referral to a specialized financial institution. Without background knowledge on contemporary North American families and their repercussions on society,

professionals practicing marriage and family therapy may struggle to assist their clients through difficult presenting issues.

Strategies for Therapeutic Intervention

Knowing the value of information on contemporary family structures, counsellors can begin to educate themselves on practical interventions. When it comes to counselling couples, families, individuals, etc., there are two modes of interventions a counsellor can use. The first is resource-based. Resource-based interventions are used when the scope of the presenting issue is beyond the realm of professional competency of the counsellor. These interventions can look like referrals to financial institutions to help clients attain financial stability, a community resources center to learn about low-income housing, or to a legal aid to assist a client through legal battles that require thorough knowledge of the law. Such areas of banking, low-income housing and legal aid may be beyond the scope of competency for counsellors. Thus, it is in a counsellor's best interest to refer to relevant resources/ professionals that can directly help clients with issues related to different fields of expertise.

The second mode of intervention is theory-based. Theory-based interventions are clinical counseling approaches directed towards clients' behavioural, cognitive, social, emotional and psychological issues. In my professional experience, the combination of both resource and theory-based interventions set clients up for the greatest success. The rest of this chapter will discuss theory-based interventions and how counsellors may use them to address some of the marriage and family issues discussed in chapter three. Before I introduce and discuss intervention strategies, however, I believe it is important to briefly mention general goals for clients in marriage and family therapy.

Marriage and Family Goals

Most marriage and family issues stem from lack of family functioning, instability and poor family relations (Fletcher et al., 2013; Haskins, 2015). The opposite of these contribute to the standard “happy benchmark” that families may strive for (Coleman et al., 2000). The difference between marriage and family verse individual client happiness, is that to increase family functioning, stability and improve family relations, multiple people are involved in the counselling process. The more people involved in attaining a goal can increase the complexity and duration of therapeutic intervention.

In light of this, Fletcher et al. (2013) proposed that marriage and family counselling be inclusive and community-based, involving multiple families to help achieve happiness goals and increase family functioning and relationships. Bringing multiple families together – as practiced in group therapy – creates an atmosphere of connectedness, trust and establishes normalcy of common issues. Doing so leads to openness during discussion around similar presenting issues, where parents and children can converse without judgment (Fletcher et al, 2013). Counselling in larger groups exposes families to new communication styles and issues other families experience. Witnessing a family struggle through issues can encourage other families to intervene on their particular family dysfunction (Brown, 2010).

Direct involvement in family counselling was not the only activity shown to have positive effects on family relations. Shaw (2001) found that engaging in purposeful leisure increases a family’s ability to function. Purposeful leisure involves organized activities, such as cooking or playing a sports game, to achieve goals related to communication, cohesion and a sense of family (Shaw, 2001). Engaging in purposeful leisure increases family functioning which reduces

likelihood of behaviour problems seen in children (Hazlett, 2014). Cooking for example, establishes a teamwork environment that uses structure and communication to achieve the goal of cooking a family meal. This purposeful activity also cultivates a sense of family cohesion where each family member contributes their effort to the final product (Shaw, 2001).

Along with family functioning, cohesion and communication, struggling families are urged to learn coping strategies to increase resiliency towards negative experiences. Titlestad and Pooley (2014) found that families who actively practiced parent modelling, controlling disclosure, had social support, a realistic perspective on situations and time to adjust to transitions were better able to cope with presenting family issues. As witnessed in single-parent families, time constraints are more likely to interfere with the ability for members to adjust to transitions; thus, maladaptation occurs. Marriage and family counsellors should recognize this barrier for single-parents and provide these clients with specific interventions. For example, parents can involve their children in the moving process following a divorce by giving them the responsibility of setting up their new room according to their liking. This involvement saves parents time setting up an additional room, as well as it gives the child control over a minor detail in the transition process (Walker et al., 2008).

Coaching parents on strategies they can use for high conduct children will also benefit families through difficult transitions. For example, marriage and family counsellors can use behavioural interventions, such as positive parental modeling and specific praise, to encourage appropriate child behaviour (Webster-Stratton, 2012). I will discuss this in the next section, but the underlying theme is that marriage and family counsellors should have a thorough knowledge of common family goals and be well versed in a plethora of intervention strategies to help their clients achieve these goals. I will now introduce and discuss different therapies that will help

couples and families through various repercussions I mentioned in chapter three. The therapies I intend to discuss and explain include pre-marital, the Incredible Years, and Bowen family system.

Theories Related to Marriage and Family Counselling

Pre-Marital Therapy

Before a couple decides on marriage or beginning a family, seeking pre-marital therapy could greatly benefit their relationship. This preventative approach seeks to strengthen relationships by targeting issues around transitions, couples stability, communication, intimacy and problem solving (Stahmann, and Salts, 1993). Pre-marital therapy aims to decrease the prevalence of divorce and prime couples for a successful marriage (Stahmann, 2000). Couples engaging in pre-marital therapy are also encouraged to use their communication and problem solving strategies within the context of a family to increase future family connectedness and cohesion. A counsellor may ask questions such as “What type of parenting style do you intend to adopt?” or “How are you two planning to split parenting responsibilities?” Asking these questions helps clarify partner’s roles before starting a family, in order to reduce conflict that may arise from parenthood (Bower, 2013). Initiating conversation around relationship and parenting issues builds effective communication skills and brings awareness to each partner’s worldview. I believe this therapeutic approach to be very useful, and contend that any couple, regardless of intent to marry, can better their relationship and family dynamic by working on related issues and strengthening their relational bond.

Stahmann (2000) claimed that pre-marital therapy is also helpful for remarriage. This occurs for single parents who remarry and thus create a blended family. Because pre-marital

therapy targets family stability and transitions, engaging in therapy would benefit remarried couples to foster positive experiences within their family during the new union ship.

Within a counselling setting, each family member is allotted time to express what would make transitioning into a blended family easier. Then, the counsellor mediates member's suggestions to develop a transition plan everyone is pleased with. Giving each member a chance to speak and express their desires preceding a transition will help create well-adjusted family members (Stahmann, 2000).

Pre-marital counsellors can also address adjustment issues by encouraging step-families to partake in activities together before cohabitation. Step-families who spend time together before living together are more likely to create better relationships, which, are essential building blocks for family stability and easy transitioning (Stahmann, and Salts, 1993). Family instability and multiple transitions contributes to negative repercussions, such as poor academic achievement, social isolation and depression, which were discussed in chapter three. Pre-marital counselling helps mitigate these repercussions, first, by strengthening the couple's relationship and attending to their needs so they are able to allot more energy towards future relationship and family issues that may arise.

Pre-marital counselling can involve as many or as little family members as possible, and encourages an open and safe environment for family members to communicate (Stahmann and Salts, 1993). Research has shown that most couples who do engage in pre-marital therapy show positive effects on their relationship and have better long term relationship outcomes (Stahmann, 2000).

The Incredible Years

I am now going to introduce a well-established, thoroughly researched, parenting skills program called The Incredible Years (IY). IY has various programs suited for children of different age groups, ranging from birth to 13 years old, and focuses on changing parent's behaviour in order to facilitate positive behaviour and emotional responses from their children (Webster-Stratton, 2005). I introduce this program to address family issues around high conduct children whose parents struggle to manage negative behaviour that is often seen in children of alternative families.

This program uses ten foundations for successful parenting, including: how to play with your child; positive attention, encouragement and praise; using tangible rewards, incentives and celebrations; setting limits; ignoring minor misbehavior; setting up time outs to calm down; educating on natural and logical consequence; teaching children how to problem solve; helping children self-regulate emotions and teaching children friendship skills (Webster-Stratton, 2005). This program is a 12-16 week psychoeducation group, run by a trained IY facilitator, which gathers weekly to educate parents on the different foundations.

The founder of the IY program, Carolyn Webster-Stratton, has spent over two decades developing this program, initially as a response to the overwhelming number of high conduct children in North American families and schools (Webster-Stratton, 2005). Through investigative research, Carolyn found many risk factors involved with children who display conduct behaviour. These factors include genetic and biological associations passed on through generations, low academic achievement and social skills (Malecki and Elliot, 2002), poor parenting skills (e.g. highly critical, unpredictable, hostile) (Ostrand and Herman, 2006), intrapersonal disturbances such as depressive mothers, interpersonal conflicts such as divorce (Evans, 2004), and environmental factors (e.g. poverty, unemployment and illness) (Webster-

Stratton, 2012). All factors mentioned are eminent issues related to contemporary family structures as discussed in chapter three. The IY program becomes more relevant as a counseling strategy knowing how in-need this information is for alternative families struggling with conduct children.

The goal of IY is to educate parents and address their parenting skill deficits (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Parents are trained to use positive language, attend to good behaviour while ignoring minor misbehaviours, and model appropriate behaviour across various environments. The importance of such parenting tactics is to influence children towards positive language and behaviour that reduces negative conduct and increases good behaviour (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Despite a lack of trained IY facilitators in any given area, family counsellors can psycho-educate parents on the foundations of IY to help reduce child aggression and misconduct. Engaging in the full program itself has been shown to reduce child aggression by 20-60%, as the earlier stages of childhood intervention are associated with more positive behaviour adjustment both at home and in school (Webster-Stratton, 2012).

To explain IY more specifically, I will use a hypothetical case study of a family of three: mother, father and child. As a result of poor communication skills and different parenting styles, the parents divorced. The father moved out and periodically sees his child, while the mother begins a part time job in addition to heading a single-parent home. As mentioned in chapter three, this scenario is common in North America. In Chapter three I also discussed the negative repercussions this family structure experiences and how divorce and multiple transitions can cause children to respond negatively.

From this divorce, the child is witnessed to display acts of violence towards his mother, and misbehaves in order to gain attention at school and in home. IY would explain this behaviour

as the child's maladaptation to the family transition (Webster-Stratton, 2012). As a result of parental separation, the child's maladaptation leads to the inability to cope and is expressed in violence and attention-seeking behaviour (Webster-Stratton, 2012).

IY would also interpret violent child behaviour as an inability for a child to emotionally self-regulate and express their frustration (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Parents can prevent violent behaviour by helping their child learn emotional regulation. Parents can teach emotion-regulation by talking and showing their own feelings which models healthy expression. Parents can verbally acknowledge their child's behaviour, stating "it looks like you're very upset right now," which helps children label their emotions, in addition to commenting on their own emotions, "I'm excited for the movie tonight," as a means to model self-expression.

Along with labelling emotions, creating a stable and consistent home environment helps children develop emotional resources to deal with the unpredictability of the outside world (Webster-Stratton, 2012). This information is pertinent for the newly divorced family, so as to keep proceeding transitions at a minimum. Stabilizing the home environment will reduce violent behaviour which allows parents to better manage their child's minor misbehaviour and relieves the child of emotional dysregulation.

As parents begin to manage their children's misbehaviour and attend to their emotional needs, they begin to establish a positive connection and attachment. To help foster this positive attachment, IY encourages parents to engage in 10-15mins a day of child-directed play (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Child-directed play is different than regular play, as it is structured play time. Within this structured play time the child gets to choose the activity, the parent must follow the child's lead and pace of play, while reducing questions yet increasing descriptive commenting (ex. Instead of asking, "What colour crayon do you have?" a parent would say, "You are using a

blue crayon.”). This type of play, in which undivided attention is given to the child, helps create a healthy attachment between the parent and child in addition to teaching them skills to improve self-esteem, confidence, problem-solving, and communication (Webster-Stratton, 2012).

The IY program also encourages parents to praise their children for positive behaviour and ignore minor misbehaviours (Webster-Stratton, 2012). When a child misbehaves (i.e. whines, nags, stomps their feet for not getting their way) a parent should simply ignore this, paying no attention. Once the child has stopped misbehaving, a parent can praise their child the first instance they see positive behaviour (i.e. quiet voice, playing nicely, listening). By ignoring minor misbehaviours and reinforcing positive behaviour, through praise or incentives, children who misbehave for attention will soon learn they only receive attention for good behaviour. The crucial element in praising positive behaviour is doing it immediately after the behaviour is displayed. A parent should praise or giving a small reward (i.e. an inexpensive item, an at-home privilege (ex. TV time) or a special outside activity) for good behaviour immediately after the good behaviour is displayed so children can link the praise/reward to the specific positive behaviour (Webster-Stratton, 2012).

In addition to child-directed play time and praising positive behaviour, IY looks to set limits and apply consequences for more aggressive behaviour. From chapter three it is known that a child who is mal adapting to a divorce situation may display violent tantrums (Hazlett, 2014). When this occurs, IY interventions would enforce a consequence for any violent behaviour. A consequence for violent behaviour may involve privilege removal (i.e. no toys, treats or social time), a time out that is no longer than 5 minutes, in addition to leaving the environment where the violence occurred (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Being consistent and

maintaining boundaries while enforcing consequences will encourage children to change their behaviour to earn the attention they strive for.

Strategies and interventions developed by IY are valuable to help strengthen relationships between parents and children who experience negative family situations (Webster-Stratton, 2012). I highly recommend this program to any family as a means to gain good parenting skills and to help foster positive child behaviour, with emphasis on families who have high conduct children. That being said, even traditional and same-sex families can use IY strategies to increase any desirable behaviour they would like to see in their children. The techniques used to mitigate minor misbehaviour can also be adapted to increase positive behaviour such as completing chores or finishing homework. The application of IY appears endless to those who develop the techniques and strategize how to adapt them to their family goals.

Bowen Family Systems Theory

Using IY techniques to teach positive child behaviour can help struggling parents manage high conduct children, those commonly seen in alternative families. As children mature, behaviours can become more severe and complex. Teenagers specifically can experience drastic changes emotionally, psychologically and biologically (Jianxun, Jianjun and Fuqiang, 2003). Consequently, parents must adopt new strategies to tackle the complexities of teenage behaviour which can be exacerbated within alternative family environments, particularly single-parent families (Jianxun, Jianjun and Fuqiang, 2003). I will now introduce Bowen family systems theory to discuss intervention strategies for negative child and teenage behaviour.

Murray Bowen, the founder of Bowen family systems theory, developed this therapy model to describe the complex system of relationships that occur in families (Papero, 2014).

Bowen defined new terms called *differentiation* and *triangulation* to describe specific dynamics he saw occurring in families with dysfunction. He defined differentiation as:

“...a process that involves intrapersonal and interpersonal capacities. In terms of the intrapersonal capacity, differentiation refers to decreasing one’s emotional reactivity within important relationships, and therefore responding intentionally to the other. Intrapersonal differentiation also refers to defining and communicating one’s own ideas and experience in the face of anxiety. The interpersonal capacity of differentiation refers to balancing the forces of separation and togetherness, taking responsibility for one’s experience, initiating and receiving intimacy voluntarily, and establishing clear boundaries. Together intrapersonal and interpersonal differentiation provide a picture of optimal relational functioning...” (Bowen, 1978, pp. 2).

By nature, each individual tries to develop their self-concept through the process of differentiation. Around age 11, pre-teens begin to view themselves as separate entities from their family structure (McKnight, 2008). Papero (2014) describes this behaviour as a healthy mode of knowing thyself – seeing oneself as an individual - which preludes to individuals owning their own sense of agency. As adolescences grow into teenagers, they begin to act and behave in ways that allow them to stand out (Morris, 2012). This behaviour can be seen as teens start to dress differently, act rebellious, spend less time with family and more time with peers, and may involve themselves in novel activities (McKnight, 2008). Struggle between parents and teens occur when the adolescents evolve their identity that does not fore fill their parent’s expectations (i.e. dying their hair purple) (McKnight, 2008).

Within a divorced family, a teen may struggle to self-differentiate due to an unhealthy attachment to either parent (MacKay, 2012). This inability creates a barrier for a person to

converse using “I” statements and instead uses “we” statements, showing that thoughts and ideas are not occurring independently (Farmer, 2005). Perhaps when the teen was a child they internalized their mother’s feelings of grief and loss following a divorce as their own. The inability for a child to differentiate other family member’s emotions from their own interferes with normal childhood development, and leads to negative repercussions (i.e. poor social skills and low academic performance (Malecki and Elliot, 2002). This also can lead to disruption in teen age development by discouraging self-discovery and instead fostering parent-dependency (Malecki and Elliot, 2002).

Counsellors can educate parents on this information, and make suggestions on how they can allow their teens distance and independence to self-differentiate. A specific strategy a parent could use, knowing differentiation is part of normal teenage development, is to support the teen’s new interests while maintaining a healthy, positive relationship with them. If a parent finds that their teen embodies their mood in response to a situation, or acts out negatively, a parent can calmly inquire about the teen’s feelings and ask their perspective of a situation. This will stimulate insight and initiate self-differentiation (Farmer, 2005). Simple questions parents can ask their teens are, “I felt frustrated when your father undermined my decision to ground you, how did you feel by your fathers response?” and “What was it like for you to experience moving to a new home when your mother and I divorced?” This allows teens to answer using “I” statements and fosters a new way teens can relate to their parents (Farmer, 2005), as well as discuss their perspective of an event in their own words.

Marriage and family counsellors can use Bowen’s idea of differentiation to strengthen their client’s view of self (MacKay, 2012). If counsellors can give insight to their clients presenting symptoms (e.g. anxiety or depression), viewing them as part of their family’s

emotional processing, than perhaps clients can develop the skill to step outside their family perspectives and self-differentiate their own emotions against set emotions of the family. As stated in chapter three, social learning theory contends people have a tendency to react to a situation in congruence with the behaviours of others (Chavis, 2012). To help intervene on this social behaviour, counsellors can engage their clients in psychodrama as a way to differentiate. Psychodrama asks clients to reenact past situations, then educates the client on how they can make the past situation a more positive experience, which is then repeatedly practiced (Farmer, 2005). Acting out past experiences is a positive way to train clients to respond differently to future situations (Farmer, 2005). Those who cannot self-differentiate essentially become followers of their social environment, becoming susceptible to behaving incongruently with their genuine self. Thus, it can be helpful if counsellors use psychodrama and insight prompting questions to encourage self-differentiation.

In addition to differentiation, Bowen describes triangulation as another term to describe family dynamics and dysfunction. Triangulation is regarded as “a potentially destructive pattern of relating” (Bowen, 1978, pp. 2). It is a natural response to anxiety but can become destructive when used to involve a third person to avoid conflict, pit one family member against the other, and minimize personally responsibility (Heiden Rootes, 2010). For example, a teenager of divorced parents may frequently transition between households whenever conflict arises. For example, a teen may argue with their father and seek comfort at his mother’s house, and vice versa. Each parent may sympathize with their child and portray their ex-partner in a negative light. Pinning one member against another is a type of triangulation that effects an individual’s ability to self-differentiate from family emotions (Heiden Rootes, 2010); therefore, family conflict is more likely to increase.

Children are most vulnerable to triangulation between divorcing parents, as parents who are frustrated with their partner may project this emotion onto their children (Farmer, 2005). Counsellors using Bowen's theory would work on creating boundaries to discourage negative responses associated with triangulation, such as projection (Farmer, 2005). Again, the use of psychodrama can help children process their emotions and increase their own thoughts rather than following automatic instinct they've learned from watching their parents (Farmer, 2005).

Triangulation can also be diminished through "walk and talk" therapy (Doucette, 2004, pg. 373). Walk and talk therapy involves walking outdoors while engaging in counselling (Doucette, 2004). This strategy found a reduction in teenage triangulation behaviour, and supported prosocial choices, self-efficacy and an increased well-being (Doucette, 2004). Walking while counselling is not only a useful strategy for counsellors, but can easily be used by parents as a means to discuss their teen's personal and family related issues.

Another goal for counsellors using Bowen's theory is to initiate insight into family dysfunction and where potential anxiety stems from (Heiden Rootes, 2010). In addition to psychodrama, this can be done through perspective taking. To initiate perspective taking, a counsellor may ask simple questions such as, "It appears your father was upset you stayed over at your mother's house after an argument, why do you think your father would feel this way?" or "How did you feel about leaving your father's house and going over to your mothers?" Because emotions can be a reaction to behaviour, de-triangulation and self-differentiating one's self from the family unit allows an individual to experience an event for themselves (Haefer, 2014). In turn this helps individuals develop a sense of agency regarding their own emotional responses (Haefer, 2014).

In contemporary families, such as blended, complex family dynamics can cause triangulation between members. Adolescents in blended families can find it difficult to have a sense of belonging when remarriage occurs, as suddenly one household inhabits step parents and step siblings (King, et al., 2015). The difficulty in having a sense of belonging stems from adolescent relationships with their biological mother and/or step father (King, et al., 2015). Triangulation with step family members is exacerbated when an individual struggles to adapt to the new family dynamic (Heiden Rootes, 2010). Counsellors can facilitate perspective-taking as a technique to understand and relate experiences of other family members and thus, mitigate triangulation. Simple reflective dialogue can initiate perspective-taking. This dialogue can look like this:

Teen: "My dad doesn't love me because he never buys me stuff."

Dad: "I don't need to buy you stuff to show that I love you."

Counsellor to Teen: "How can your dad show you he loves you without buying you stuff?"

Teen: "He could spend time with me, but he never does because he's always working to make money. I don't get stuff for the money he makes, and also don't get to spend time with him."

Counsellor to Teen: "So you feel as though your dad doesn't love you because he doesn't buy you stuff and doesn't spend much time with you?"

Teen: "Yeah."

Counsellor to Dad: "Perhaps this is the reason your son has been acting out for attention, because he feels like you are not present at home and don't make up for your absence with material items."

Dad: “I can see why that would be difficult for my teen, I should be making more of an effort to spend time with him if I don’t choose to buy him stuff.”

Reflective dialogue helps family members gain an understanding of another’s perspective. This helps families gain insight to family dysfunction, and explain triangulation behaviour (Farmer, 2005). In this example, the dad was unhappy and concerned that his teenage son was always nagging him for material goods. The behaviour became so frequent and persistent that the dad would lash out at his son. Simple dialogue to facilitate perspective-taking helped the dad recognize that the son felt neglected, and believed he should receive material items in lieu of his dad’s constant absence from the home. Once the dad made the connection, he was able to sympathize with his son and start allotting more father-son time.

The conceptual idea of differentiation and triangulation described in Bowen’s family system, in my opinion, accurately depicts behaviour seen in dysfunctional families. Taking sides, projecting, or internalizing other emotions during negative family events can manifest itself in an individual’s inability to self-differentiate and can foster triangulation behaviour. Knowing this family system and the aspects that make up its theory can help marriage and family counsellors attend to presenting issues by supporting their client’s self-identity and emotions. Reenacting experiences through psychodrama and engaging in perspective taking via reflective dialogue will also foster insight into an individual’s experience and family dysfunction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to this chapter and to this thesis as a whole, the topic of contemporary family structures and its relations to the decline of marriage in addition to its impact on society has been well researched and discussed. I have mapped the development of contemporary

families, its impact on marriage, and have shown the significant effects on the population of North American society, both internally and externally.

The central themes derived from this thesis include the various issues contemporary families struggle with, and how society has responded to it. There is clear evidence that alternative families, with the exclusion of same-sex, experience more negative life events which lead to family conflict and dysfunction. This conflict and dysfunction affect adults and children who experience it, and suffer in areas of academic achievement, social and emotional development, household income and more.

The rising prevalence of alternative families requires more public interventions and support from government, education and social institutions. Aiding alternative families with financial and professional resources will create a society that inhabits more happy and healthy citizens. This can be achieved through suggestions outlined in chapter three.

The theories and counselling strategies proposed in chapter four is sufficient for marriage and family counsellors to initiate marriage and family interventions. I contend that pre-marital counselling sets couples up for a successful marriage and family life. I also believe the IY program effectively diminishes conduct seen in children reared from alternative families, while Bowen family systems theory offers helpful techniques to address teenage differentiation and triangulation behaviour. Counsellors should engage in professional development to more thoroughly educate themselves on relevant marriage and family techniques which they feel will benefit their specific clientele, as well as society as a whole. The strategies mentioned in this thesis are a good basis for marriage and family therapy, and can be generalized over many contemporary family issues.

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