

Stability and Crisis in the Family Life Course - Findings from the 1990 General Social Survey, Canada

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Abstract

This paper examines the flow of family life course events between ages 30 and 54. The life course is viewed from three perspectives: chronological age, social time and historical time. Using the data collected in 1990 through the General Social Survey (Cycle 5), this study finds some interesting differences in the life course patterns among birth cohorts of men and women spanning three quarters of the twentieth century. Stability in the family life course is implied by the 'typical' sequences of events such as marriage followed by childbearing and rearing, which in turn is followed by launching of children. There exists a crisis in the sense that marital dissolutions are increasingly taking place, but that some sort of stability in the family life course is restored in that there is also an increasing proportion of reconstituted families through remarriage. Some of these findings are interpreted against historical backgrounds.

Résumé

Nous examinons le flux des événements du cycle familial entre les âges 30 et 54 ans. Le cycle familial est considéré selon trois perspectives: âge chronologique, temps social et temps historique. À base de données de l'Enquête Sociale Générale de 1990 (cycle 5), nous observons des différences importantes dans le parcours de la vie selon les cohortes d'hommes et de femmes, durant le troisième quart du 20^e siècle. Le cours typique d'événements, comme le mariage suivi de la procréation et éventuellement le lancement des enfants, impliquent la stabilité dans le cours familial. À cet égard, on peut parler de la crise qu'apporte l'accroissement des dissolutions de mariages. Par ailleurs, la stabilité est retrouvée dans le sens qu'il y a un accroissement des familles reconstituées par le remariage. Certains de ces résultats sont interprétés à base de conjonctures historiques.

Key words: Family life course, event sequence, General Social Survey Canada, life table methodology

Introduction

This study examines the flow of family life events between ages 30 and 54. The span of life covered here includes the 'middle age' which, in the North American context, is normatively set to be about ages 40 to 50 (Neugarten et al., 1965). This is a period in which individuals generally perceive themselves to be in control or in the prime of life (Neugarten, 1967). Yet, Carl Jung called this span of life the 'afternoon of life'. Many studies in psychology also view it as a period of 'crisis' which happens "with the realization that life is half over and that one is no longer young" (Clausen, 1972 citing Lowenthal and Chiriboga, 1969). Examining the life course experiences between ages 30 and 54, therefore, can reveal the trends and changes in either stability or crisis in family life.

A life course approach is used in this study. This approach helps to examine the synchronization of individual transitions with collective family behaviour as well as historical changes and the cumulative impact of earlier transitions on subsequent ones (Hareven, 1980, 1991; Clausen, 1995). Within this framework, individual life histories are viewed as a sequence of transitions, each affecting the choices in the next phase of life.

The timing of a life course may be viewed from three perspectives: (1) *life time* or *chronological age* which tracks the biological process of growing old; (2) *social time* which marks the transitions from one social role to another, for example, from childhood to youth to adulthood; and (3) *historical time* which reflects the influence of a series of historical events - political, economic, and social - on the life course of individuals (Neugarten and Danan, 1973; Elder and Caspi, 1988, 1990).

The chronological age of 30 to 54 is used as a vantage point from which to view the social timing of life course events. As will be seen below, social timing is presented here in terms of proportions experiencing certain events by a certain age and, more specifically, in terms of durations from the occurrence of certain events. To consider the effects of historical time, we use the idea of birth cohorts defined as a group of individuals who were born during a period; for example, those who were born during the years 1911-20 or 1921-30, etc. Successive birth cohorts experience, among other things, changing patterns of family and peer-socialization, different educational content and options, varying economic conditions of growth and unique events such as war and political change (Ryder, 1965). Given that our data are from a survey which collected retrospective information, there seems to be no better way to examine the historical changes than through the idea of birth cohorts.

Many studies have focussed on two ends of the life course: on transitions to adulthood at the beginning, and towards the end, that is, on transitions into old age (Modell et al., 1976; Cooney and Hogan, 1991; Hogan, 1978, 1981;

Rajulton and Balakrishnan, 1990; Cherlin, 1980; Waite and Spitze, 1981; Gerson, 1985; Chudacoff and Hareven, 1979). This paper concentrates on transitions at mid-life, which have not attracted as much attention from researchers (but see Pavalko and Elder, 1990; Norton, 1980, 1983).

Data and Methodology

General Social Survey

The data collected in 1990 through the General Social Survey (GSS) on Family and Friends provide the needed information on the family life course in Canada. The GSS interviewed a random sample of 13,495 men and women aged 15 and above all over Canada excepting the residents of the Yukon and Northwest Territories and full-time residents of institutions. The last age group was left open-ended as 80+. We can examine therefore the birth cohorts of men and women spanning three quarters of the twentieth century. For analytical purposes, men and women are conveniently grouped into five ten-year birth cohorts: 1911-20, 1921-30, 1931-40, 1941-50, and 1951-60. These cohorts were aged 70-79, 60-69, 50-59, 40-49, and 30-39 respectively at the time of the Survey. We ignore those born before 1911 and after 1961.

A common impression is that younger cohorts, say, aged 40 or less at the time of the Survey, would not have had the time and opportunity to experience as many events in the family life course as older cohorts. The GSS data reveal that this is a wrong impression. The number of family life events experienced by younger cohorts can, and does, exceed that of older cohorts in spite of the associated short span of life. This is mainly because of the divergent paths initiated by younger cohorts in their family life course. Yet, technically speaking, experiences in family life, especially of younger cohorts, are curtailed by the Survey. The experiences of older cohorts are no exceptions to this; for example, a woman aged 75 may become a widow a year after the Survey. This truncation of experiences by the survey is known as *censoring* in the statistical literature and is handled adequately through life table methodologies explained below.

Life Course Stages

The decision on what life course stages to include in an analysis largely depends on data availability and the type of analytical techniques adopted in a study. The GSS collected information on respondents' biographies including home-leaving, union formation (marriages and commonlaw unions) and dissolution (separations, divorces and widowhood), births and home-leaving of children. Dates or ages when the respondents experienced these events provide us with a rich source of life histories. These data can be used to trace the paths or

transitions in the family life course stages of men and women.

A typical life course passes through the stages of launching, family formation, extension, completed extension, contraction and completed contraction. To these, we can add a few atypical stages such as commonlaw unions, separations and divorces, widowhood and second marriages (or reconstitution). We therefore consider the life course transitions taking place among the following stages:

Family formation :	Home-leaving (HL) First Cohabitation (FC) First Marriage (FM)
Family dissolution	First Separation/Divorce (FSD)
& reconstitution :	First Widowhood (FW) Second Marriage (SM)
Family extension :	First Birth (FB) Last Birth (LB)
Family contraction :	First Launching (FL) Last Launching (LL)

Since the first (or last) child to leave home need not be the first-born (or last-born), the two stages FL and LL do not necessarily mean the home-leaving of first-born and last-born respectively. These stages simply capture the timing when launching starts and ends. All these stages, along with the starting point of the life course, that is, Origin at age 15 (OR), make a total of eleven stages.

Methodology

First, the experiences of various family life events between ages 30 and 54 will be examined separately for each cohort of men and women. This method is mainly descriptive and throws light on the changes and trends in these events over cohorts. Second, to handle the problem of truncation of life course events, life table analyses will be used to examine further the changes and trends for those events which have given rise to divergent paths taken by younger cohorts.

A life table is an accounting device that follows a real or hypothetical cohort of individuals over time. It relates the stage an individual has reached to the probability of moving from that stage to a specific destination stage. A life table yields several statistics, one of which is the probability of surviving in a stage. The technique followed for constructing a life table has an advantage over other

statistical techniques since it 'corrects' the probabilities of experiencing or not experiencing an event for censoring.

When comparing the experiences of different birth cohorts, one of the potential problems that we need to address is that of selectivity, particularly in the case of younger cohorts. It is not only that many of the later life events will be experienced by younger men and women beyond the survey time (which falls under the concept of truncation/censoring) but also that some of these younger men and women would have already experienced these later life events. It is the latter which is included under the concept of selectivity: these younger men and women form select groups in the population because they have experienced these later life events earlier in their life. To avoid this problem of selectivity, results of the younger cohorts (1951-60) are excluded in some tables.

Findings from the GSS Data

Life Course Stage at Age 30

Early events such as leaving the parental home and marriage generally happen before age 30. The timing of these early events determines the timing of later events. Thus, differences in social timing of the entire life course are definitely established by age 30.

This is seen in Table 1 which shows the percent distribution of women and men by life course stages at age 30. Let us first consider the women respondents. The oldest cohort (1911-20) stands out as distinctly different from the next three cohorts in that a higher proportion of women were still in the early stages of the life course (notably home-leaving and first marriage stages). At age 30, an appreciable proportion of these women had not experienced first birth or other stages of family extension.

In contrast to the oldest cohort, the social clock ticked faster in the next three cohorts of women (1921-30, 1931-40, and 1941-50). These cohorts had the greatest proportions in the family extension stages. About 70% of women were either in the first birth (FB) or last birth (LB) stage at age 30. This is particularly true with the 1931-40 and 1941-50 birth cohorts, almost 45 to 50 percent of whom had their last birth by age 30. The greater number of children borne by women born during the twenties accounts for their lower percentage in the last birth stage at age 30, in comparison to the number of children borne by the next two younger cohorts.

Another feature that differentiates these three cohorts from the oldest cohort is the increasing proportion of women at age 30 in the separation/divorce (FSD) and remarriage (SM) stages. Though these proportions are low at age 30, many more in these cohorts experienced these two events between the ages of 30 and 54 (see below).

**Table 1. Percent distribution of respondents by life course stages
at age 30, classified by gender and cohorts - GSS Canada, 1990**

Life course events	Birth Cohorts (age at survey in brackets)				
	1911-20 (70-79)	1921-30 (60-69)	1931-40 (50-59)	1941-50 (40-49)	1951-60 (30-39)
a) WOMEN					
sample size	518	752	811	1144	1488
Origin	10.4	3.9	2.2	2.5	3.8
Home-leaving	12.7	8.6	9.0	6.4	9.9
First Cohabitation	0.1	0.4	0.3	2	6.9
First Marriage	17.6	12.4	9.7	10.9	11.4
First Separation/Divorce	0.4	0.7	2.5	5.2	5.6
First Widowhood	0.2	0.9	1.1	0.4	0.4
Second Marriage	0.6	0.9	1.2	1.5	2.6
First Birth	41.8	50.1	29.9	21.2	19.9
Last Birth	16.1	21.9	43.8	49.6	38.7
First Child Launching	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.3	0.5
Last Child Launching	-	-	-	-	0.2
b) MEN					
sample size	362	665	803	1134	1461
Origin	10.6	8.7	6.1	4.2	4.9
Home-leaving	18.5	15.8	11.5	8.8	14.6
First Cohabitation	0.1	0.9	1.0	3.3	10.7
First Marriage	17.5	16.5	14.5	14.3	14.1
First Separation/Divorce	0.8	0.8	1.1	3.1	3.1
First Widowhood	0.4	0.1	0.2	-	-
Second Marriage	0.6	0.7	1.4	1.6	2.1
First Birth	42.5	43.5	38.2	31.6	22.0
Last Birth	8.9	12.7	25.9	30.8	25.2
First Child Launching	-	0.3	0.2	2.0	2.1
Last Child Launching	-	-	-	0.3	1.2

The life course of the youngest cohort of women born during the fifties is different from those of the preceding cohorts in other ways. By age 30, the proportion in first union is similar to that of the oldest cohort (18 percent). But one-third of those unions in the youngest cohort were commonlaw unions as opposed to the traditional form of union among women in the oldest cohort. Another similarity in the life course transitions between the youngest and the oldest cohorts is the proportion (about 58 percent) in the family extension stages (that is, first and last births). Thus, the social timing of transitions among women born during the fifties was as slow as that among women born during the early part of this century. However, the youngest cohort of women followed a social timing that is different from the one followed by the oldest cohort. This is because most of them completed childbearing by age 30 (with a much smaller number of children) and an appreciable proportion experienced marital dissolution through separation or divorce. These changes experienced by the youngest cohort simply reflect the trends established by the two previous birth cohorts.

Differences among men's cohorts are similar, but the magnitude of differences at age 30 are not as big as among women. For example, while the difference in the proportions of women belonging to the 1911-20 and 1921-30 cohorts is 14 percent at the family extension stage (first and last births combined), this difference is merely 5 percent among men. Such small cohort differences are due to the later start in men's life courses, who generally leave their parental homes later and marry later.

The smaller magnitude of differences among men's cohorts can also be explained by the greater variation with which men experience the life course events. The index of variation for the distribution of life course stages at age 30 is higher in men's cohorts than in women's cohorts¹. Low variation among women reflects the greater normative and biological constraints on women regarding the social timing of events such as marriage and childbearing.

Life Course Events Between Ages 30 and 54

Since the timing of life course events experienced after age 30 is greatly dependent on events experienced before age 30, the cohort differences in life course stages at age 30 are also carried over to older ages. This is seen in Table 2 which shows the percent distribution of events experienced between ages 30 and 54 for cohorts born between 1911 and 1950. The last cohort, aged 40-49 at the time of survey, has been included just for looking at old ways and new trends, and caution should be exercised in using these figures.

This table shows that the proportions experiencing the early events (such as leaving the parental home, first marriage, and first births) between ages 30 and 54 are higher in the oldest cohort of women than in the younger cohorts. As seen in Table 1, many women in the oldest cohort postponed their home-

leaving, marriage or childbearing to ages beyond 30. Consequently, later events (such as home-leaving of children) were also experienced by them at ages beyond 54.

Another feature that distinguishes the oldest cohort of women from the younger cohorts is the higher proportion (15 percent) experiencing widowhood between ages 30 and 54. Due to improvements in men's life expectancy, this proportion was halved over the next two cohorts.

As seen in the last section, many women born during the twenties and thirties were already at the stage of family extension at age 30 (with a high proportion at the completion stage). Therefore, most of them experienced the home-leaving of their first child and a significant proportion experienced the home-leaving of their last child as well between ages 30 and 54. These two cohorts stand in contrast to the oldest cohort. They followed a faster social timing not only for the early events (such as first marriage and first birth) but also for the later events (such as home-leaving of children). The smaller number of children borne by these women decidedly contributed to the earlier social timing of later events.

At the time of survey, the 1941-50 birth cohort had not reached the age of 50. Therefore, the events expected to happen around the age of 50 (home-leaving of children, for example) cannot be meaningfully compared with those experienced by the older cohorts. Regarding other life course events, however, 1941-50 birth cohort stands out in having the highest percentage of women experiencing first separation/divorce (16 percent) and first cohabitation (9 percent). This cohort set a trend in life course transitions which would be followed by the cohorts born after 1950.

Again, the cohort differences among men are similar to those among women. Most of these differences can also be traced to the differences in the stages at age 30. In general, the gender differences in experiencing the events between ages 30 and 54 can also be attributed to the fact that women experience them at younger ages. For example, the proportions of men experiencing the early events (such as leaving the parental home, first marriage, first birth) between ages 30 and 54 are usually greater. This is because more women go through these events before age 30. Likewise, more men would experience later life events (such as children's home-leaving) after the age of 54.

The other events where gender differences are consistent across cohorts are widowhood and second marriage. Few men experience widowhood but more widowers remarry than widows. Reasons for the lower proportion of women getting remarried are the scarce marriage market and the lower motivation to remarry particularly among older women (Rajulton and Burch, 1991).

Stability and Crisis at Mid-life

Table 2 showed that the major life course events experienced by men and women between ages 30 and 54 were either last birth or a child's home-leaving. This implies stability in the sense that most Canadians follow the 'typical' life course of childbearing and rearing during this mid-life period. That is, it is a period when family extension is completed and launching of children starts. This feature of stability at mid-life is further supported by the GSS data when the events between ages 30 and 54 are examined further by immediately preceding events (not presented here). In all cohorts, 79% or more of first births occur after marriage, 80% or more of the last births follow first births. And, in the oldest three cohorts, 75% to 80% of last births are followed by launching of first child. Fifty percent or more of the women and men born during the forties and fifties also experience this sequence in spite of the significant proportion of marital dissolutions among them. All these indicate some form of stability in the pattern of sequences of family events experienced by Canadians.

However, crisis occurs in the afternoon of life in terms of marital dissolutions either through separation/divorce or through widowhood. These two events largely occur in this mid-life period. About eight percent of men and women born during the twenties, for example, experienced first separation/divorce between ages 30 and 54 (Table 2). In contrast, the corresponding percentages of separation/divorce experienced by the same women before age 30 and after age 54 are one and two percent respectively (not presented in the table).

It is worth noting at this point that although only three percent of women in the oldest cohort (1911-20) experienced separation/divorce, marital dissolutions nevertheless occurred among them through widowhood. As seen in Table 2, the combined percentages of widowhood and separation/divorce are about the same (about 18 to 20 percent) in all cohorts of women. Thus, between ages 30 and 54, about 20% of women seem to undergo a life course crisis in terms of marital dissolution through widowhood and among younger cohorts through separation/divorce. This percentage is much lower for men born before the thirties (mainly because of widowhood) but has climbed to about 15% for men born during the thirties and forties.

The fact that the proportions experiencing a marital dissolution between ages 30 and 54 do not vary greatly among women implies that the chronological timing has not changed much over cohorts. But the social timing of marital disruptions has definitely changed over cohorts. To make this point clear, Table 3 presents the percent distribution of separations/divorces classified by immediately preceding event. In this table, we include the birth cohort 1951-60 (that is, those aged 30-39 at the time of survey) not only because a large number of separations/divorces have already been experienced by this cohort but also because a comparison with the immediately previous cohort reveals to us a trend that would be established by the end of this century.

Table 2. Percent distribution of respondents who experienced respective life course events between ages 30 and 54, classified by gender and cohorts - GSS Canada, 1990

Life course events	Birth Cohorts (age at survey in brackets)			
	1911-20 (70-79)	1921-30 (60-69)	1931-40 (50-59)	1941-50 (40-49)
a) WOMEN				
sample size	518	752	811	1144
Home-leaving	13.5	8.9	5.5	3.6
First Cohabitation	1.0	2.4	4.9	8.5
First Marriage	13.4	5.9	5.7	6.1
First Separation/Divorce	2.8	8.5	12.6	15.8
First Widowhood	15.0	11.4	7.1	1.7
Second Marriage	3.7	6.7	8.0	6.5
First Birth	16.0	9.1	11.1	9.3
Last Birth	52.6	58.7	40.0	27.8
First Child Launching	66.8	79.1	76.0	34.7
Last Child Launching	20.4	27.2	32.8	11.2
b) MEN				
sample size	362	665	803	1134
Home-leaving	15.8	13.0	6.9	4.8
First Cohabitation	0.5	2.6	8.0	10.4
First Marriage	23.4	19.8	11.6	8.6
First Separation/Divorce	3.6	7.3	16.3	14.9
First Widowhood	3.4	4.2	1.4	1.2
Second Marriage	5.4	7.0	9.2	9.0
First Birth	32.5	25.6	22.9	18.3
Last Birth	58.0	61.2	56.9	43.1
First Child Launching	56.8	64.7	66.6	26.2
Last Child Launching	13.0	19.2	27.6	9.2

Table 3. Percent distribution of separations/divorces classified by immediately preceding event and by gender and cohorts, GSS Canada, 1990

Life course events	Birth Cohorts (age at survey in brackets)				
	1911-20 (70-79)	1921-30 (60-69)	1931-40 (50-59)	1941-50 (40-49)	1951-60 (30-39)
a) WOMEN					
number of separations/divorces	26	86	143	275	284
Preceding event:					
Home-leaving	19	5	6	5	8
First Cohabitation	-	-	2	2	4
First Marriage	19	13	15	20	33
First Birth	19	15	13	21	27
Last Birth	12	22	45	38	25
First Child Launching	23	36	16	12	2
Last Child Launching	8	9	4	1	-
b) MEN					
number of separations/divorces	27	70	152	252	193
Preceding event:					
Home-leaving	4	7	4	7	5
First Cohabitation	-	-	7	10	5
First Marriage	15	23	16	31	40
First Birth	22	16	13	17	18
Last Birth	19	29	33	18	12
First Child Launching	22	14	19	12	15
Last Child Launching	19	11	8	4	5

Among women born during the twenties, 36 percent of marital disruptions by separation or divorce were preceded by launching of first child. In other words, separations/divorces occurred late in the life course of this cohort of women. Women born during the thirties experienced dissolution even earlier; separations/divorces are preceded mostly by birth of last child. If the life course transitions in the youngest cohorts of men and women indicate any new trend, it is clear that, despite the problems of truncation and selectivity, marital disruptions may occur even before childbearing starts.

Can we infer then that the social timing of marital disruption has definitely moved to earlier stages of the life course? A definite answer cannot be given from this table because of the problem of censoring. It is possible that the truncation of experiences, especially of younger cohorts, may have inflated these proportions because those individuals who have experienced the number and sequence of events may form a select group.

To overcome the problem of censoring, we compute the life table probabilities of surviving marriage through separation and divorce. The slopes of the survival curves (not shown here) confirm that the chances of first marriage surviving separation/divorce have continually and dramatically decreased over cohorts. Further, to get around the selectivity problem, Table 4 compares across cohorts various positional measures of duration (computed from the survival probabilities) at separation/divorce.

The first row (N at risk) in this table gives the number of married respondents in the sample cohort, and the second row gives the proportion not separated/divorced in each cohort. The percentiles tell us the duration since marriage (in years) when 5%, 10%, 25% of men and women in each cohort were separated/divorced. For example, it took as long as 29 and 31 years since marriage for 5% of men and women in the oldest cohort to get separated/divorced. In contrast, it took only 5 and 6 years for 5% of men and women born during the forties to experience a marital disruption. The percentiles given in Table 4 show a steady decline over cohorts in the duration at dissolution of marriage. Since these measures have been corrected for censoring, they indirectly confirm that marital disruptions have shifted to earlier life course stages among younger cohorts. Very short durations such as three or five years at separation/divorce in younger cohorts cannot but imply this.

The percentiles given in Table 4 also reveal a unique phenomenon: Women generally take a longer time than men to become separated/divorced. But the younger cohorts of women (those born during the fifties and sixties) have access to dissolution procedures earlier than men (for more details, see Rajulton and Ravanera, 1995). This remarkable change is perhaps due to the economic independence and 'liberation' that younger women experience.

**Table 4. Duration (in years) between first marriage and separation/divorce
at various percentiles, classified by gender and cohorts,
GSS Canada, 1990**

	Birth Cohorts (age at survey in brackets)				
	1911-20 (70-79)	1921-30 (60-69)	1931-40 (50-59)	1941-50 (40-49)	1951-60 (30-39)
a) WOMEN					
N at risk	461	706	767	1046	1216
Proportion not dissolved*	.94	.87	.79	.66	.65
5-th percentile P5	31.38	19.06	9.24	5.63	3.06
10-th percentile P10	-	31.00	16.84	9.18	5.24
15-th percentile P15	-	-	23.40	13.88	7.58
20-th percentile P20	-	-	38.52	18.20	10.36
25-th percentile P25	-	-	-	20.00	13.80
30-th percentile P30	-	-	-	24.80	16.93
b) MEN					
N at risk	328	617	736	1003	1071
Proportion not dissolved*	.92	.88	.77	.69	.70
5-th percentile P5	29.31	14.42	10.62	4.62	2.86
10-th percentile P10	-	30.32	18.00	8.05	5.52
15-th percentile P15	-	-	21.61	12.23	8.33
20-th percentile P20	-	-	29.54	16.61	11.63
25-th percentile P25	-	-	-	20.79	15.75
30-th percentile P30	-	-	-	24.59	19.93

Source: Rajulton and Ravanera, 1995.

Table 5. Duration (in years) between first marital dissolution and second marriage at 10th percentile and quartiles, classified by gender and cohorts, GSS Canada, 1990

		Birth Cohorts (age at survey in brackets)				
		1911-20 (70-79)	1921-30 (60-69)	1931-40 (50-59)	1941-50 (40-49)	1951-60 (30-39)
a) WOMEN						
N at risk		257	274	216	302	301
Proportion second married*		.24	.34	.55	.67	.58
10-th percentile	P10	5.62	4.53	4.19	4.30	3.12
First quartile	Q1	-	12.42	8.09	7.52	4.80
Second quartile	Q2	-	-	27.01	19.88	11.28
Third quartile	Q3	-	-	-	-	-
b) MEN						
N at risk		91	131	174	265	203
Proportion second married*		.62	.66	.76	.79	.55
10-th percentile	P10	2.21	3.04	2.89	2.29	3.02
First quartile	Q1	7.33	5.59	5.49	4.67	5.29
Second quartile	Q2	30.76	16.20	10.88	11.86	10.86
Third quartile	Q3	-	-	27.88	22.59	-

Source: Rajulton and Ravanera, 1995.

Is there a stability after crisis?

If family dissolutions are taking place in larger proportions and sooner after marriage, then how about the reconstitution of families? The GSS data on second marriage reveal that family reconstitutions are also taking place in larger proportions and sooner after dissolution. Table 5 gives the relevant summary statistics on second marriage. The respondents included in computing these statistics are those who had experienced divorce or widowhood. Again, these statistics (percentiles and quartiles) have been computed from the survival probabilities which have been corrected for censoring.

The proportions remarried (second row) show the obvious: Remarriage is more common among men than among women. In the oldest cohort, for example, we see a 40% difference between men and women. What is more revealing, however, is that this difference has greatly diminished over cohorts. Women's prospects for remarriage have increased over cohorts to such an extent that we observe an almost equal proportion of men and women remarried in the youngest cohort. And, as the percentiles show, remarriages are taking place earlier in the younger cohorts. Again, this change is dramatic among women.

These findings tell us that some stability is being restored after the crisis in the family life course discussed in the last section. The increasing proportions of marital dissolutions through separation or divorce cannot be interpreted as growing disillusionment with marriage as a social institution when there is also an increasing proportion remarrying. This may be an indication that dysfunctional marriages are being rejected but that marriage itself is not in crisis.

Discussion

The life course between ages 30 and 54 is characterized by stability. It is the period of life when family expansion is completed, when children are reared, and when a first child is launched. However, the timing when these transitions are made and the chances of experiencing 'crises' in family life (for example, separation/divorce and remarriage) have changed. The analysis by cohorts has shown clearly, particularly among women, that these changes started with the 1921-30 birth cohort and intensified in the next two cohorts born during the thirties and forties. Another set of changes seems to have occurred yet again in the youngest cohort born during the fifties.

It is also clear that the differences in experiencing the life course stages between ages 30 and 54 can be traced back to the differences before age 30. The timing of transitions to last birth and launching of children is greatly dependent on the timing of transitions to the earlier stages of leaving the parental home, family formation, and family extension. Thus, to understand the changes over cohorts in the pattern of life course transitions between ages 30 and 54, one should examine the influences in the lives of young adults, some of which will be identified below. The focus will be on women among whom changes over

cohorts seem to be more spectacular than among men.

The oldest cohort of women (1911-20) seems to have continued the "Western European" life course pattern, that is, late marriage, high proportion never married, and high proportion with no children (Hajnal, 1965; Gee, 1986). The fact that a part of these women's youth was spent during the Great Depression of the 1930s may also have contributed to the late family formation among them.

The second World War must have had an influence on the cohort of women born during the twenties. For reasons that may have been related to the war and its effects, these women married and had births earlier than women born a decade earlier. This pattern of early marriage set a trend in the succeeding cohorts born during the thirties and forties. These two cohorts spent their youth at the time of post-war prosperity and when the "feminine mystique" was in full force. It is also in these cohorts where the non-traditional events such as separation/divorce and commonlaw union became more significant. The youngest cohort considered in this study came clearly under the spell of women's liberation movements and increasing work participation. As Bergman (1986:53) observed: "In matters of divorce and jobs for women, we can again see that causation runs in both directions. Conflicts about the sharing of housework in two-earner couples may make separation and divorce more likely. Women with independent access to money income are more likely to want to end a distasteful marriage. Husbands of women with earnings undoubtedly find it easier on their consciences to terminate their marriages than do husbands of housewives."

The above historical and socioeconomic episodes had their impact on the life course experiences between ages 30 and 54, particularly on home-leaving and family formation. But there were also other external sources of change that might have directly influenced the life course experiences between ages 30 and 54. Two of those important external influences are the changes in divorce laws and the introduction and widespread availability of contraceptive technologies. The change in values regarding married women's work participation might also have affected the life course events at mid-life.

This study has tried to show that stability *and* crisis are two aspects of the family life course that should be examined simultaneously. Exaggerating the importance of one to the neglect of the other does not portray the real changes that are taking place in society. The GSS data reveal that while there are larger proportions of marital dissolutions and earlier access to dissolution procedures (particularly among women), remarriages are also taking place in larger and larger proportions. What Hareven (1983) said about divorce trends in the United States probably applies in Canada as well. She noted more than a decade ago that in the past, the low rate of legal divorce was due to its social unacceptability and not because families were living happily and in harmony. "Thus, the increase in divorce statistics as such is no proof of family breakdown. In some respects, it is a proof that people care enough about the contents and quality of family life and marriage to be willing to dissolve an unsatisfactory

marriage (and commonly to replace it with a more successful one.)" (Hareven, 1983:89).

This study also points to the need of exploring more fully the entire gamut of historical, social, economic, and cultural factors leading to changes in the life course at mid-life. In addition, the changes over cohorts in life course transitions are clear. The trends initiated by one cohort are more aggressively followed by a later cohort. It would also be useful to explore the influences of one cohort, say their behaviour and size, on another cohort's life course patterns. This would require new devices to examine and measure the influence of one cohort on another cohort.

Footnote

1. This index is called Qualitative Variation (QV) and indicates the degree of heterogeneity of a distribution. QV is the ratio of the amount of variation actually observed in a distribution to the maximum variation that can exist in that distribution. The index varies from 0 (implying no variation) to 1.0 (maximum variation). Therefore, the higher the index value, the greater the heterogeneity in the distribution of respondents by life course stages. The index values for men and women are:

	1911-20	1921-30	1931-40	1941-50	1951-60
Men	.808	.808	.824	.850	.914
Women	.816	.744	.770	.758	.855

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