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How Divorce Lost Its Groove



Robert Caplin for The New York Times

NOT THE '70S Isabel Gillies of Manhattan said that for the sake of her children she works to keep a friendly relationship with her ex-husband.

By PAMELA PAUL
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A COUPLE of months ago, Susan Gregory Thomas, a writer in Brooklyn, was at a friend's 40th birthday party when she was approached by a woman familiar to her "from the whole Park Slope mommy culture."



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Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times
Stacy Morrison of Brooklyn said that for many people of her generation, "the notion of divorce has become one of failure again."



Margaret Riegel

"So you're Susie Thomas," the woman practically shrieked upon introduction. "You're famous." Taken aback, Ms. Thomas asked what she meant.

The woman swiftly backpedaled. "Oh, you just come up in these conversations all the time," she said.

"I was like, just give me the hemlock," Ms. Thomas, 42, recalled.

Though she wasn't entirely surprised. Ever since her divorce three years ago, Ms. Thomas said, she has been antisocial, "nervous about what people would say."

After all, she had gone from Park Slope matron, complete with involved husband ("We had cracked the code of Gen X peer parenthood") and gut-renovated brownstone, to "a Red Hook divorcée," she said, remarried with a new baby and two children-of-divorce barely out of preschool. "All of a sudden, this community I'd lived in for 13 years became this spare and mean savannah," she said.

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MOST E-MAILED MOST VIEWED

It was as if, she said, everyone she knew felt bad for her but no one wanted to be near her, either. Even though adultery was not part of the equation, Ms. Thomas said, "I feel like I have a giant letter A on my front and back."

That a woman who has been divorced should feel such awkwardness and isolation seems more part of a Todd Haynes set piece than a scene from "families come in all shapes and sizes" New York, circa 2011. But divorce statistics, which have followed a steady downward slope since their 1980 peak, reveal another interesting trend: According to a 2010 study by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, only 11 percent of college-educated Americans divorce within the first 10 years today, compared with almost 37 percent for the rest of the population.

For this cross section of American families — in the suburban playgrounds of Seattle, the breastfeeding-friendly coffee shops of Berkeley, Calif., and the stroller-trodden streets of the Upper West Side — divorce, especially for mothers with young children underfoot, has become relatively scarce since its "Ice Storm" heyday.

For every cohort since 1980, a greater proportion are reaching their 10th and 15th anniversaries, said Stephanie Coontz, author of "Marriage, a History."

Teresa DiFalco, a 41-year-old mother of two from a suburb of Portland, Ore., recalled being shocked when her husband wanted to split up three years ago.

"I had this sense of: 'You're kidding me. We have children. It's not allowed,'" she said. Divorce was not a part of her children's landscape, Ms. DiFalco said. Her son had just one acquaintance whose parents were divorced, her daughter none.

Similarly, Molly Monet, a professor of Spanish at Mount Holyoke College who separated from her husband in 2007, said she felt out of sync, "like the ultimate bad mom."

"Now my children were from a 'broken home,'" she said. "My first response was, Is this going to devastate the kids?"

Andrew Cherlin, a sociology professor at Johns Hopkins University, said: "The shift in attitudes and behavior is very real. Among upper-middle-class Americans, the divorce rate is going down, and they're becoming more conservative toward divorce."

Dr. Cherlin, author of "The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and Family in America Today," attributes the swing to multiple factors, among them, a generational makeover.

It's as if the children of Manhattan and Roslyn, N.Y., and Bethesda, Md., reflected on their parents' sloppy divorces and said, "Not me." For Ms. Thomas, whose parents separated when she was 12, "Divorce had pretty much defined everything in my life." In her divorce memoir, "In Spite of Everything," to be published this summer, Ms. Thomas recalls telling her ex-husband many times during their 16-year marriage, "Whatever happens, we're never going to get divorced."

Now that the children of a divorce generation have grown up and have children of their own, it is inevitable some will divorce, despite their worst fears and best intentions. Most marriages that end in divorce fall apart in the first 10 years. But according to the widely cited Marriage Project study last year, among college-educated couples who married in the mid-1990s, the likelihood of divorcing in the first 10 years of marriage fell 27 percent compared with college-educated couples who married in the 1970s.

In a 2008 survey, only 17 percent of college-educated Americans agreed with the statement, "Marriage has not worked out for most people I know," compared with 58 percent among the less educated.

The experience of being a divorced woman has changed, along with the statistics. "The No. 1 reaction I get from people when I tell them I'm getting divorced is, 'You're so brave,'" said Stephanie Dolgoff, a 44-year-old mother of two elementary-school daughters who was separated last year. "In the 1970s, when a woman got divorced, she was seen as taking back her life in that Me Decade way. Nowadays, it's not seen as liberating to divorce. It's scary."

Ms. Coontz, whose most recent book, "A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and Women at the Dawn of the 1960s," examines the changes in marital expectations for

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women, said that for many women of that earlier era: "Divorce *was* freedom. Many of these marriages in the '70s were fundamentally unequal. With the women's movements, they learned that there were alternatives, and that made divorce kind of a liberation."

But in an era of peer marriages, in which both partners are expected to contribute and truck along, that mentality appears to have diminished. As noted by the National Marriage Project study, "Highly educated Americans have moved in a more marriage-minded direction, despite the fact that historically, they have been more socially liberal."

"What happened?" asks the writer Claire Dederer in her memoir, "Poser," which examines life as a new mother in Seattle. In the 1970s, "the feminists, the hippies, the protesters, the cultural elite all said, It's O.K. to drop out." In contrast, "We made up our minds, my brother and I and so many of the grown children of the runaway moms, that we would put our families first and ourselves second. We would be good, all the time. We would stay married, no matter what, and drink organic milk."

Which takes us back to brownstone Brooklyn.

"One of the hardest things about divorce today is that you feel like you have to explain or apologize for it," said Stacy Morrison, author of "Falling Apart in One Piece," another divorce memoir. (Did anyone even write searing divorce memoirs in the '70s?)

"The notion of divorce has become one of failure again," said Ms. Morrison, 42, a resident of Park Slope. "It used to be, 'You're free, rock on!' Now it's, 'You couldn't make it work, you failed.'" Ms. Morrison described people's reaction as "the two-second blink" when she says something along the lines of, "Zack is with his father today."

Among a certain demographic, marriage is viewed as something that, like work-life balance, [yoga](#) and locavore cuisine, needs to be continually worked at and improved upon. When Ms. Dolgoff tells others about her divorce, their response, with disquieting frequency, is "Yes, well, marriage is hard" as in, "You knew that getting in."

Blogs and child-rearing books suggest a subtle — and sometimes not-so-subtle — social pressure to tough it out. From the 1970s to the 2000s, the percentage of highly educated Americans who believe that divorce should be made more difficult rose from 36 to 48 percent.

"It could be that among college-educated couples, the men are behaving better and the wives aren't as interested in getting out," said Andrew Hacker, a professor emeritus at Queens College who has written frequently about social currents. "Guys are doing more cooking, and they're not bad at it!"

(Indeed, according to many divorced men, now more involved in their children's lives than their predecessors, they do not feel the same level of scrutiny.)

The shift contains an economic as well as a social component.

"That this change has occurred mainly among the affluent suggests it's not just a reaction to the divorce epidemic of the '70s," Dr. Cherlin said. "The condemnation of divorce is also coming from the group that is most confident it can make its marriages succeed, and that allows them to be dismissive of divorce."

From this perspective, splitting up with tender, vulnerable children in the mix is seen as a parental infraction.

"I've definitely experienced judgment," said Priscilla Gilman, author of a new memoir, "The Anti-Romantic Child," which deals in large part with her 2006 divorce. "Everyone said: 'Isn't there anything more you can do? Your kids need you to be together. They're so little.'" At the time, Ms. Gilman knew only one other person who was divorced. "I had progressive, feminist friends. None of them were getting divorced, none of them."

Several divorced women suggested that the news of their marital unraveling seemed to unnerve other couples in their social circles, prompting unease about their own marriages. (That anxiety may not be entirely unfounded. One study out of Harvard, Brown and the University of California, San Diego, last year found that divorce actually is contagious: when close friends break up, the odds of a marital split among their friends increase by 75 percent.)

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“There has been a striking shift in both beliefs and behavior towards marriage among educated and affluent Americans,” said W. Bradford Wilcox, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia and director of the National Marriage Project. “There’s a tacit or explicit recognition among well-educated parents that their kids are less likely to thrive if Mom and Dad can’t be together.”

Is this, then, the revenge of the children-of-divorce generation, rebelling against the experiences of their mothers and fathers? When I asked people who divorced in their 20s and 30s while researching my 2002 book, “The Starter Marriage,” about why they divorced with such alacrity, the response was near universal: “I wanted to do it before it was too late — before we had kids.”

Whereas their parents were divorce pioneers in the ’70s, unsure of how marital dissolution affected children and letting caution blow in the wind, today’s splitting couples are viscerally aware of how divorce feels to a 7-year-old.

“Since the 1990s, we’ve been trying to come up with a process that is more emotionally humane and accounts for the interests of children,” said Joanna Roth, a Harvard-educated lawyer in Seattle who entered divorce law after she and her husband split up. “The parents I see through this process have their children foremost in mind.”

Dr. Monet, of Mount Holyoke, and her ex-husband eat dinner together on Fridays with their 9-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter. Birthdays and holidays are spent in each other’s company.

“Once I realized that we could raise the kids together and still be a family,” said Dr. Monet, who started a blog called Postcards From a Peaceful Divorce last year, “I realized it wasn’t divorce that’s devastating, it’s the way divorce is handled.”

When Nina Collins, 41, a former literary agent, divorced her husband, she said both her lawyer and therapist emphasized: “Divorce is completely different from when your parents split up. If your kids feel loved and they don’t see hideous behavior, they’ll be fine.”

“Of course, there’s still trauma,” Ms. Collins said. “But I think it’s gotten a lot more humane for everyone.”

A common belief is that if the divorce is done properly, the children benefit more from the separation than from living in a family with a compromised marriage. Ms. Gilman, echoing the sentiments of many divorced mothers, said, “In the end, I actually think it was a very positive thing we did for the kids.”

In another unexpected twist, some divorced women say they detect an unspoken envy. Other wives and mothers, they explained, were “battling it out” while dealing with the unceasing tasks of wifedom, motherhood and work.

“What I get from a number of married women in my community is jealousy of my new lifestyle,” Dr. Monet said. “Dating, going to yoga five times a week, having time for myself. Raising young kids with a spouse doesn’t afford you much time.”

Ms. Morrison also sees a subtle, unexpected reaction. “Among my college friends and my closest friends, I’m still the only one who’s divorced,” she said. “In a funny way, I think I may have turned into the groovy one.”

That does not necessarily make divorced motherhood any easier.

“I spent an enormous amount of energy making everything friendly and loving with my ex and his wife,” said Isabel Gillies, an actress who is following up her divorce memoir, “Happens Every Day,” with a book about divorce’s aftermath, “A Year and Six Seconds.”

When her ex-husband visits their children in Manhattan from Ohio, he and his wife stay in Ms. Gillies’s apartment and she moves out.

“It’s a bit more seamless than it was in the ’70s,” she said. “Instead of the kids back and forth, we’re the ones who maneuver.”

Enter the latchkey moms.

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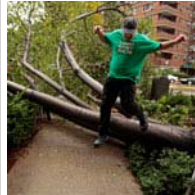
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