

T H E U N I V E R S I T Y O F M A N I T O B A

A Study of Some of the General Characteristics of
Families Involved in Desertions in Winnipeg during
the Month of October 1957

Being the report of a Research Project submitted
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Social Work.

By

Lloyd W. Beaumont

Winnipeg, Manitoba

May 1958

T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

	PAGE
LIST OF TABLES	iv
CHAPTER:	
I - INTRODUCTION	1
II - BACKGROUND INFORMATION	8
III - METHODS	31
IV - ANALYSIS	43
V - SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	65
BIBLIOGRAPHY	79
APPENDIX	
A) - SCHEDULE OF QUESTIONS USED WITH THIS SAMPLE	83

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE		PAGE
I	Number of Couples by Age of Husband and Wife at Marriage	44
II	Total Number of Marriages, showing Differences in Ages of Partners	46
III	Number of Desertions by Age of Deserted (Deserting) Man and Woman at Time of Desertion	48
IV	Number of Children of the Couples	51
V	Proximity of Ages of the Children	52
VI	Number of Couples By Religious Denomination	56
VII	Number of Couples by Country of Birth of Husband and of Wife	57
VIII	Number of Couples By Year of Entry into Canada	58
IX	Number of Couples By Ethnic Origin of Husband and Wife	60
X	Number of Couples by Education of Husband and Wife	61
XI	Occupation of the Deserting Husband	63
FIGURE		PAGE
I	Number of Years Married	49
II	Total Percentage of Desertion by Denomination	54

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Disharmony in marriage has been approached from many points of view. Psychologists, sociologists, clergymen, physicians, psychiatrists, educators, lawyers, and social workers - all have examined aspects of the problem. The following is an attempt to examine a segment of this field through families that are involved in desertion.

From reading about the subject, it appears that the basic causes of desertion, like those of divorce, are found in marital discord. But there is one additional factor in the case of desertion which is not present in connection with divorce. The person who initiates a petition for divorce is following the rules which society has laid down for those who wish to sever the family bonds. The rights of the family will be protected by the court. But the deserter appears to be one who does not take responsibility for the pressures of life and family, and allows both the law and the rights and needs of his family to be neglected. The question thus arises as to whether or not certain groups in our population are especially lacking in certain scruples.

With this in mind, I would like to base the following project on some of the general characteristics of the husbands, wives, and children as listed in the identifying information

of the various sample cases.

Discussions of desertion usually emphasize the fact that the cause of broken homes is domestic discord. This shows that the primary problem is marital unhappiness, and not the desertion in which it eventuates. Perhaps, in most cases, too much attention is given to the final break, and not enough to the underlying family crisis. Because of this, I would like to compare the results of studying these characteristics with other studies completed on marital adjustment, and see if our findings have a relation to marital discord findings.

Thus the hypothesis is that there are some characteristics common to all deserted families and that, according to other studies, these characteristics are related to marital discord.

In looking for a research project, Miss Maysie Roger, Director of Research for the School of Social Work, approached the various Winnipeg agencies for suggestions. Because of the seriousness of the problem of desertion and the lack of information on the subject, Mr. Patrick, Director of the Public Welfare Department, City of Winnipeg, suggested that a study be done in this field. The other agencies concurred with this suggestion. The Director of the School accepted the suggestion, and the study was set up as a pilot group research project. The research is to be completed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work for the 1957 - 58 school year.

The sample cases will be chosen by the six agencies: the Family Court, the Family Bureau, the Childrens Aid Society, the Child Guidance Clinic, the Department of Public Welfare (City of Winnipeg), and the Department of Provincial Health and Welfare, in accordance with our definition of desertion. The definition of the deserted family will be as follows:

1) Where there are couples living apart at any time during the month of October 1957, except where they are living apart because of divorce or a separation agreement.

This will include:

- A. Where the partner has wilfully left and is not supporting his family.
- B. Where the partner has wilfully left but since then has received a court order for support.
- C. Where the wife leaves without or with the children and, of her own choice, does not follow it up by court action.
- D. Where the wife leaves with or without the children, takes court action, and the action goes against her.

This will exclude:

- A. Mutual agreement to separate or to divorce.
- B. Separation by court order.

The information will be gathered by the students working on the project. They will read the case records provided and record the needed information on a prepared schedule. This schedule contains questions pertinent to each student's particular study of the total picture of desertion. The next

step will be to do a "trial run". Some students will go to each agency for half a day, read the files, and complete the schedule, paying particular attention to the instructions. Following this, we will have an idea of the time it takes to do one file, of the pertinence of the questions asked, of the points that need clarification, and of the adequacy of the schedule. We may find that the time needed to read the total number of files will be more than we can spare. If this is the case, and keeping in mind our research methods, we will confine ourselves to a reduced sample. When the satisfactory schedules are completed, they will be checked and re-checked by another student in order to detect mistakes. This material will be coded according to printed instructions, and then photostatically copied on small cards. Each card will have all the information taken from one case. Each student will receive one card for each case.

In order to answer our main question, there are several sub-questions which we will have to answer first. As these questions will be dealt with in some detail in Chapter III, I will only mention them here for the sake of focus. These questions are as follows:

1. Does the age at marriage relate to desertion? The disparity between the ages of the married couple?
2. Does the number of years that the couple have been married relate to desertion?
3. Do the number of children in the family and the closeness of their births relate to desertion?

4. Was the wife pregnant at the time of desertion?
5. Do the occupations contribute to desertion?
6. Was the husband unemployed at the time of desertion?
7. Is there any relation between religion and desertion?
8. Is there any relation between nationality and

desertion?

9. Do the academic standings of the husband and wife relate to desertion?

10. Does the deserter come home periodically?

The reason I am confining myself to some of the characteristics, even though a more comprehensive study would be preferable, is that the required information for such a comprehensive study is not available in all the files. In order to obtain a sound overall picture, I will have to use that information which is common to most of the files.

The material that I am using for the comparison is a definite limitation. As there have been few recent studies published, I find that most of the material is taken from projects completed several years ago. More recent material would probably make a better comparison.

Another point is that most of the comparison studies were conducted in the United States. I therefore find myself comparing the Canadian sample to American samples. In dealing with marital discord, it is felt that the problems would be similar regardless of whether the sample is Canadian or American.

As will be seen in Chapter II, my bibliography consists of reading on desertion, divorce, family life, marital adjustment, and marital discord. I have paid particular attention to valid studies completed by various authorities on the significant factors that I am concerned with. Many of these studies will be used as a comparison to my findings.

Most authorities on the subject agree that desertion is the result of marital discord in one form or another. Because of this, I have also concentrated on material concerning marital adjustment and marital maladjustment. I feel that I can base my findings on much of this proven information, and perhaps show that there are characteristics which, when found in one or both spouses in a particular marriage, may cause that marriage to be prone to marital discord. At the same time, I can compare my results with what is considered ideal for good marital adjustment. From this, I should be able to show if the characteristics are close to those noticeable in good marital adjustment or maladjustment.

The main source for the comparison material is from periodicals such as the American Sociological Review, Social Forces, American Psychological Review, The Family, etc., and many individual books written by such authorities as Groves, Hollis, Nimkoff, Hill, Good, Mowrer, Terman, Burgess and Cottrell. The Canadian census and pamphlets issued by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics are also valuable in obtaining correct information on population, etc..

The proposed method of analysis and presentation of the

data will be statistical and descriptive, using tables to give a clear picture whenever possible. The findings of this study will be compared to the findings of other studies as mentioned earlier. This will be dealt with in detail in Chapter III.

In Chapter II, I will discuss material compiled and studies done by authorities on the factors that I am interested in.

In discussing the study proper, Chapter III (Methods) will describe the methods used in selecting the sample, in administering the schedule, in the composition of the schedule, in the coding, and in the manner in which the findings will be analyzed.

In Chapter IV, we will analyze the pertinent material from the "photo-stat" cards.

In the Summary and Conclusions, Chapter V, the significant findings will be discussed in relation to the questions and to other studies.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The investigation of marital adjustment is still almost a virgin field for sociological and social research. While excellent studies have been made by the Mowrers, Hamilton, Dickinson and Beam, Davis, Jessie Bernard, Popenoe, Terman, Burgess, Cottrell, Hixenbaugh, Woodhouse, Hart, and others, the samples have been varied and have been studied with different objectives in mind. However, it is thought by many that the probabilities of success in marriage are affected by such factors as: nationality, religion, education, occupation, ages at marriage, number of years married, and the number of children. Whether or not this prediction is true in every particular case - a matter which we shall shortly investigate - it is interesting because it shows a general appreciation of the fact that some conditions are more favourable to marriage than others. Not as well appreciated, however, is the fact that marriage itself is somewhat of a strain upon the original nature of man. Marriage is good for man, as shown by the evidence that married people generally live longer, enjoy better health, and get into less trouble than single people. Even so, marriage, as the culturally organized relationship of a male and a female, places certain strains upon human nature that are either lacking or less

pronounced in the unmarried state. Marriage generally means a degree of intimacy between two persons which is greater than that between friends; marriage is the more intense relationship, with more of the characteristics of the participants laid open to view than would be the case with friendship. In point of time, as well, marriage is an outreaching experience, a twenty-four hour a day, fifty-two week a year relationship. If tensions develop, it is more difficult to get away from one's spouse than from a friend or acquaintance without doing damage to the relationship. Marriage also makes many demands upon the individual which cannot well be shifted. "Because it is such an intense, such a protracted, such an exacting experience, marriage itself is frequently a source of tensions."¹

Discussions of desertion usually emphasize the fact that the basic cause of broken homes is domestic discord, and the point is important, for it shows that the primary problem is marital unhappiness and not the desertion in which it eventuates. As a rule, too much attention is given to the final surgical action and not enough to the underlying family crisis. It is well to keep this point in mind, for there are some disorganized homes which are not broken. These couples are unhappy, but they do not separate, because of various circumstances, such as religious scruples, a sense of responsibility towards the children, and considerations of occupation

¹Meyer F. Nimkoff, "The Relation of Parental Dominance to Parent-child Conflict", Social Forces, IX (June, 1931), pp. 559-63

and social status.

There is always the possibility that the alternative to an unhappy marriage may be even less attractive than the marriage itself. How numerous such cases are we have no way, of knowing, for we have no data on the proportion of all unhappy homes that are eventually broken. What we do know is that the proportion of marriages ending in desertion has greatly increased during the last half-century.

Desertion and divorce are family problems that have much in common. On account of this likeness, desertion is commonly called "the poor man's divorce".² Although this statement correctly brings out the fact that desertion among the poorer classes is often a substitute for divorce, it is misleading insofar as it conveys the impression that these two forms of family disintegration are the same, except that one is confined exclusively to people having a lower economic status. Desertion is one type of family disintegration; divorce is another. The wealthy, the professional classes, and those socially well established turn for various reasons, when family life becomes unsatisfactory, to the divorce courts for relief, while the more mobile unskilled worker, or the individual whose occupation provides great economic freedom, cuts himself away from family difficulties by merely leaving home and disappearing. There are many reasons why the well-to-do should prefer the use of the legal method of

²Ernest R. Groves, "Divorce and Desertion", The American Family, (J. P. Lippincott Co., Chicago, Philadelphia, 1934), pp. 260 - 262.

getting free from marital difficulties. In addition to the other social advantages of divorce, it is the customary way of getting freedom in their class and, therefore, in accord with the proprieties. In the professional class, divorce frequently carries with it social risks from which the individuals shrink, but to attempt to escape these by family desertion would be ruinous; in some cases, it would mean throwing away a professional reputation and giving up all hopes of a second start in one's vocation, as well as negating the possibility of another legal marriage. Here also, the class code does not include family desertion as a proper means of getting rid of marital difficulties.

A study of the conscious motives that lead men in the poorer classes to leave their families discloses the fact that desertion is not just an easier and cheaper way of ending matrimony than is offered by divorce. Often the husband seeks not so much to get rid of the family as to become free from an economic burden, from conditions of work that seem intolerable or from unemployment that appears hopeless. Then the family is not so much repudiated as left behind. The man is consciously seeking not so much a permanent separation from his family as a brief spell of relief from the heavy load he has been carrying or an opportunity to start afresh. To be sure, rationalization is as often found in the motives that lead to desertion as in other lines of conduct where the reason built into consciousness conceals the deeper desires that bring about the behaviour. It is easy for the

desertion that starts as a temporary expediency to become a permanent separation, and in many of these cases the men drift into a complete and final severance of family ties rather than deliberately break from the family with a definite decision to seek a divorce.

It is easy for the unskilled or construction worker to pack up and leave a family situation which has become troublesome. Indeed, this procedure is often the line of least resistance, for it seems, and often actually is, easier to go than to stay. Wanderlust and the desire for travel are at times contributory motives, and they may even constitute occasionally the chief cause of desertion. It is this type of desertion that has led Social Work to call desertion "the poor man's vacation from his family",³ rather than a divorce.

Where the desertion results from a family incompatibility which in some other class would be likely to end in a divorce, it is easy to understand why so many men prefer to leave their family rather than resort to the legal method of separation through the divorce court. They are familiar with desertion, for it is frequent enough in their class to be a matter of common knowledge, and they have little understanding of court procedure, particularly when they are immigrants who are perhaps suspicious of any process that has to do with our legal machinery. Moreover, if they have religious scruples against divorce, they may find desertion less

³Ibid, pp. 260 - 262.

antagonizing to their conscience.

Relatively recent writings have further developed the theory of the relation of occupation to marital adjustment. One phase of the theory is that occupations characterized by marked physical mobility and by slight group control tend to show a high degree of marital instability, whereas occupations subject to stationary employment and community supervision have low rates of marital maladjustment.⁴ Mobility is thought to be bad for marriage because it means frequent uprooting of individuals, which attenuates group ties; the separation of family members; and the development of divergent patterns of behaviour.⁵

When the happiness ratings of husbands in a considerable number of occupations were examined, it was noted that the proportion of happy marriages was very high among school-teachers, and very low among travelling salesmen.⁶ These ratings are explained in terms of the theory that travelling salesmen are among the most mobile and least supervised persons in our population, while teachers are among the least mobile and the most highly controlled. The two factors of physical mobility and social control are not unrelated, since

⁴Ernest W. Burgess & Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., Predicting Success or Failure in Marriage, (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939).

⁵Harvey J. Locke, "Mobility and Family Disorganization", American Sociological Review, V (August 1940), pp. 489 - 494.

⁶Richard O. Lang, "The Ratings of Happiness in Marriage", (Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Chicago Libraries, 1932), American Journal of Sociology, Vol. XLIX, (1943 - 44), p. 248.

it is difficult to exercise control over individuals whose work keeps them on the move.

The theory expounded about leads to the question as to whether occupations are selective of personality traits. For instance, does the occupation of travelling salesman in general attract persons who have habits and attitudes which distinguish them from those, let us say, who go into teaching? If such selection does occur, the further question may be asked: what significance, if any, do the selected traits have for marriage? Terman has presented some evidence showing that the happily married are more emotionally stable and more highly socialized than the unhappily married,⁷ and Winch's studies suggest that these attributes are probably of premarital rather than of postmarital origin.⁸

If occupations are selective of personality traits, as some believe, then the effect of the occupation itself may be largely limited to reinforcing an already existing tendency in the individual toward marital stability or instability.⁹

The age difference between husband and wife in its relation to happiness in marriage has always been a subject of popular discussion. Hornell Hart and Wilmer Shields did a pioneer study based upon a comparison of the ages at marriage

⁷Lewis A. Terman, Psychological Factors in Marital Happiness, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1938).

⁸Robert Winch, "Personality Characteristics of Engaged and Married Couples," American Journal of Sociology, XLVI (1941), pp. 686 - 697.

⁹M. F. Nimkoff, "Occupational Factors and Marriage", American Journal of Sociology, Vol. XLIX (1943 - 44).

of couples appearing in the Domestic Relations Court of Philadelphia and the ages given by couples applying in the same city for licenses to marry. They summarized their findings as follows that the ideal age for marriage is about 29 for the groom and 24 for the bride; that deviations of four years on either side of the ideal age for the groom, or of two years on either side of the ideal age for the bride, make no appreciable difference; that marriage in which the bride is under twenty-one years of age, or the groom under twenty-four, become rapidly more dangerous as younger ages are considered; that marriages in which either party is nineteen or younger are from ten to one hundred times as risky as marriages at the ideal age; and that marriages of persons over thirty-eight years of age are from two to five times as likely to result in domestic difficulties as are marriages at the ideal age.¹⁰

According to the popular notion, the husband should be older than his wife, but not much older. Investigation of the age differences of married couples in relation to marital happiness does not, however, substantiate this notion. In the Burgess-Cottrell sample, the largest proportion of good adjustments was made where the wife was older than the husband, and the next best record was made by marriages where the husband was eight or more years older than the wife. These marriages also tended more to extremes of adjustment,

¹⁰Hornell Hart and Wilmer Shields, "Happiness in Relation to Age at Marriage", Social Hygiene, XII (1926), pp. 403 - 410.