

Causes and Consequences of Divorce: Cross-national and Cohort Differences, an Introduction to this Special Issue

Divorce and separation seem to be highly private decisions, based on considerations made by individuals and couples. The outcome of the research, presented in this special issue, shows that this is an incomplete view. Not only are the individual decisions on divorce and separation clearly influenced by the social characteristics of the involved individuals, but they are also influenced by the characteristics of their societies and their affiliation to certain marriage cohorts. Therefore, this issue is especially devoted to the comparison of divorce and separation processes between different European societies and between different generations. Until now, the research on divorce and separation has been restricted to one society, and only few research has dealt with the question of differences between cohorts, for instance studies of Blossfeld and Hoem. This issue fills this omission with comparative research, especially between European societies that differ enough in their divorce and family policies and in welfare regimes to allow for these comparisons. For the first time, we can answer questions on the relevance of divorce laws and family policies for divorce and separation and their social and economic consequences. This emphasis on cross-national comparisons is the first innovative aspect of this issue.

The second is the emphasis on divorce and separation in different European societies. The last decades have shown a rise in the rate of divorce in Europe. In all European countries, the probability of divorce or separation among married or cohabiting couples has increased, although in some countries more quickly and more radically than in others. At the same time, in some European countries, the rise of divorce rates stopped after the very strong increase of the 1970s and 1980s, whereas in other countries the rise did not stop during the 1990s. The rise in divorce or separation in (continental) Europe deviates in some aspects from developments in the United States. Divorce is less common in Europe than in the

United States, and the differences within Europe are spectacular.

There are enough reasons to assume that societal aspects are related to this rise in divorce and separation rates. One of these reasons is the variation of divorce risks between European countries. Why should—for example—the effect of marriage age or female employment on the divorce rate be high in one country and low in another country?

Some demographers consider divorce to be a result of growing individualization and secularization in society. These two processes put pressure on the traditional values of marriage and raising children, leading to an increased divorce rate. If this is true, those European societies with less secularization and individualization should have lower divorce rates. If a higher educational level of couples produces a higher level of individualization, there should be a positive relation between educational level of both spouses and their divorce risk.

An economic tradition attributes the rise in divorce rates to changes in the balance between the cost and benefits of marriage for both husband and wife. If this is true, there should be a higher divorce rate among women with high-income jobs, because a high income facilitates to bear the costs of divorce, and women with a high income are economically more independent from their spouse. In that case, divorce rates in European societies with more full-time working married women in upper positions should be higher. But the negative effect of parental divorce on children is often explained by the poverty of mother-headed single families. In that case, negative effects of parental divorce should be lesser in European societies with more full-time working mothers in higher positions than in other societies. Social security systems might reduce the degree of poverty in mother-headed single families, which might lead to differences in negative effects of parental divorce between European societies.

Liberal divorce laws might also lead to higher levels of divorce, as some politicians maintain. If this is true, differences between and changes in divorce rates of European societies depend on the differences in their divorce laws. The causality may also be reversed, because divorce laws tend to be liberalized *after* the trend in divorce has begun. But the still existing differences between divorce laws may also affect the consequences of divorce, for example, more liberal divorce laws might dampen the negative effects for children because they prevent long lawsuits and thus the intensity and length of the parental conflict, and there should be less stigmatization of divorced people and their children if laws are liberal.

Another assumption about the consequences of divorce for inequality is that they result from stigmatization of the divorcees and their children by the surrounding society. If this assumption is true, the consequences of divorce should become smaller when the divorce rates increase, because the higher these divorce rates are the more normal divorce becomes and thus the lower the level of stigmatization. In that case, policy makers do not need to worry about the divorce rates but only need to address the stigmatization of divorce to counter the relation between inequality and divorce. Therefore, it makes sense to compare these negative consequences in different European societies with different divorce rates.

Of course, we cannot address all the questions in one special issue, and therefore, we hope that this special issue is just a start. To promote the research on these societal aspects of divorce, the editors of this special issue founded an informal *European Network for the sociological and demographic Study of Divorce*, which held conferences at the European University Institute in Italy, at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, and at the University of Cologne in Germany.

The first article of this special issue is a meta-analysis of European longitudinal studies on divorce risks, written by Michael Wagner and Bernd Weiß. They focus on the cross-national effects of premarital cohabitation, the presence of children and the experience with parental divorce on marital stability, and they could use 120 studies for their meta-analysis. This number of usable studies shows that the study of divorce risks has reached the European social sciences. They show that there is considerable heterogeneity of divorce risks within as well as between countries. The variation of effect sizes between European countries was related to marriage norms and divorce barriers. In countries where more rigid marriage norms prevail, cohabitation has a stronger effect on marital stability than in countries where marriage norms

are weaker. Furthermore, the lower the divorce barriers are the weaker is the association between the parental divorce and the divorce risk of the offspring.

The second and third articles investigate a long-standing but rarely tested argument of William J. Goode that the relationship between democratization of divorce and the class composition of divorce is inverse. This relationship differs across countries and across time, so that higher class couples have higher risks of divorce in countries and at times when the social and economic costs of divorce are high, and that there is no or a negative relationship where these costs are lower. Juho Harkonen and Jaap Dronkers examine the relationship between female education and the risk of divorce over time in 16 European countries and the United States. They found that women with higher education had a higher risk of divorce in France, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Spain and that in Austria, Lithuania and the United States, the educational gradient of divorce is negative. Furthermore, the educational gradient becomes increasingly negative in Flanders, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and the United States. The de-institutionalization of marriage and unconventional family practices in these countries seem to be associated with a negative educational gradient of divorce, while welfare state expenditure with a more positive gradient.

The article of Paul de Graaf and Matthijs Kalmijn also starts with the notion of Goode but tests it by comparing marriage cohorts in a single country (cohorts 1942–1999 in the Netherlands). Next to examining changes in the effect of education, it also addresses historical developments in the effects of four other social determinants of divorce: parental socioeconomic status, educational attainment, religion, parental divorce, and having children. The effects of parental socioeconomic status, religion, parental divorce, and having children have not changed over marriage cohorts. The one and only exception lies in education, which has changed from a positive effect to a negative effect. In times when divorce was uncommon, the higher educated were more likely to divorce than the lower educated. Currently, the lower educated are more likely to divorce than the higher educated, despite the increasingly important link between female education and women's economic independence and the more liberal family values of the higher educated.

Hans-Jürgen Andreß, Barbara Borgloh, Miriam Bröckel, Marco Giesselmann, and Dina Hummelshaim analyse a classical question of divorce studies, but contrary to earlier contributions within a cross-national perspective, the economic consequences of partnership

dissolution in different institutional settings of family support: market model, extended family model, male breadwinner model, and dual earner model. They assume that the short- and long-term economic consequences of partnership dissolution are the lowest in Sweden and the highest in Italy with those in Belgium, Germany, and Great Britain ranging in between. Using multivariate panel data models, it is shown that adjusted household income is affected for both genders, but women more than men, that the income decline is highest in Italy and lowest in Sweden, and that British and German women recover rather quickly from the negative economic effects of separation. Sweden stands out as the country with the highest gender equalities with respect to post-separation incomes. However, in the long run both Swedish men and women have to deal with long-lasting financial consequences after separation, which do not appear to the same extent in any of the other countries.

The last contribution of Tamar Fischer and Aart C. Liefbroer tries to relate macro-economic conditions with union dissolution rates in the Netherlands during the historical period of 1972–1996. Because the current knowledge on the association between macro-level conditions and union dissolution rates is limited, they examine the effects of macro-economic conditions on union dissolution and control these effects for changes in the cultural climate and in the financial institutions

for those needing support. They show that a linear and negative relationship between consumer confidence and union dissolution rates of women exists, irrespective of their level of education.

All these contributions indicate that union dissolution and divorce are not just events that might happen in lives of individuals, depending on their individual characteristics or life course. They all demonstrate that union dissolution and divorce are events deeply influenced by the societal context, despite its unique appearances. Sociology can contribute to the analysis of the phenomena.

Jaap Dronkers

*Department of Political and Social Sciences,
European University Institute, Florence, Italy
E-mail: jaap.dronkers@eui.eu*

Matthijs Kalmijn

*Department of Social Cultural Sciences,
Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands
E-mail: m.kalmijn@uvt.nl*

Michael Wagner

*Research Institute for Sociology, University of Cologne,
Greinstr. 2, D-50939 Cologne, Germany
E-mail: mwagner@wiso.uni-koeln.de*

DOI:10.1093/esr/jcl015, available online at www.esr.oxfordjournals.org