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Divorce: Trends, Patterns, Causes, Consequences

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Abstract: This contribution provides an overview to what is known about divorce, its trends, cross-national variation, predictors, and consequences. Geographically, the focus is on Europe and North America and I focus on formal divorce, that is, the ending of a marital union. The paper is a contribution to a book volume edited by Judith Treas, Jacqueline Scott and Martin Richards: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*.

Reference

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The increases in divorce rates have been among the most visible features of the recent decades of family change. Some have seen this as a sign of social and moral disruption with a potential to shatter the family institution and the foundations of society itself. Others have celebrated these trends as signalling increased individual liberty and the loosening of suffocating social mores. Divorce is one of the most often mentioned major life events (Gähler, 1998) and can cause major stress and upheaval for many, and a sense of relief and opportunity for personal growth for others. It is no wonder that divorce and family instability have attracted wide attention among social scientists.

This chapter provides an overview to what is known about divorce, its trends, cross-national variation, predictors, and consequences. Geographically, the focus is on Europe and North America and I will follow the trend in research and focus on divorce, that is, the ending of a marital union. In most cases, the event of significance is the end of marital cohabitation. The legal procedures that end the marriage may in many cases continue well past the separation of the couple. Other forms of union or marital dissolution, such as permanent separation, desertion, and annulment (marriage declared not valid) have received less research attention.

However, acknowledging the changing family landscape, in which much cohabitation and family life occurs outside marriage, a growing number of studies have looked into the dissolution of unmarried cohabitations. There is still active debate on whether, when, and in which countries cohabitation is like marriage, or not (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). Many cohabiting unions either split up or are transformed into marriages relatively quickly, even in countries in which cohabitation is common (Jalovaara, 2012). In general, cohabiting unions are less stable than marriages (e.g., Andersson, 2002). There are many similarities in the factors that promote or undermine the stability of marriage and cohabitation, as are in the consequences of

their dissolution. However, some important differences can be found which are generally linked to the weaker institutionalization and the continuity of unmarried cohabitation (e.g., Brines & Joyner, 1999).

Furthermore, almost all of the literature has focused on heterosexual couples. Recent years have seen a wave of legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, which has consequently raised scholars' interest in their demography. But information concerning the dissolution of same-sex couples remains relatively limited. Research suggests that although same-sex partnerships are in general less stable than heterosexual marriages, the predictors of their instability are in many respects similar (Andersson et al., 2006; Lau, 2012).

Theoretical perspectives on divorce have ranged from macro-sociological theories of the role of divorce in the family system to micro-level perspectives on the processes conducive to marital instability (Kitson & Raschke, 1981). Many scholars begin from an at least implicit account of divorce in which partners remain in their marriages as long as the benefits of doing so exceed the sum of the costs of dissolving them and the benefits of other options (e.g., Levinger, 1976; Brines & Joyner, 1999). This rationalistic perspective is most explicit in economic approaches to marriage and divorce (e.g., Becker, 1981; Becker, Landes & Michael, 1977). The benefits and costs include emotional rewards, mutual support and commitment, economic and moral considerations, social sanctions and approval, legal issues, children, and new partners. Divorces can be analyzed as events, that is, the decision to leave a partnership and the ending of the marriage. However, they are often preceded by a long process of ending the relationship, which can include estrangement from the spouse, stress, conflicts, and even violence (Amato, 2000), and, as mentioned, the legal procedures dissolving the marriage may last well after both spouses consider the marriage ended. Thus, defining and measuring divorce—when it starts and

when it ends—can be difficult. Despite the conflicts surrounding many divorce, many seemingly functional marriages end in divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007) and on the other hand, not all troubled marriages break up. This underlines the heterogeneity of divorces and the importance of factors that act as barriers to divorce or the possible options beyond it, and of the need for looking beyond marital quality and satisfaction as determinants. Divorce, in other words, is a multifaceted event (Gähler, 1998).

Trends and cross-national differences in divorce

Consider Figure 1 which shows the trends in the crude divorce rate for selected countries. Before proceeding to a discussion of these trends, it is important to understand what these numbers tell us. The crude divorce rate shows the number of divorces per 1,000 individuals in the population. It is not a perfect measure of underlying marital instability and, particularly, does not tell how many couples eventually divorce (Preston & McDonald, 1979; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). Crude rates are known to fluctuate over time and a sudden increase, for example, can indicate that many couples divorce sooner than they otherwise would have. As it is not adjusted for the number of married couples, the crude rate can also be affected by changes in the popularity of marriage. Despite these limitations, the crude divorce rate correlates strongly with better measures (Amato, 2010). It is available for long time periods and for several countries and is thus suitable for describing long-term cross-national trends.

Divorce rates were higher in all the countries represented in Fig 1 at the beginning of the new millennium than just after the First World War. Yet there are major cross-national differences. The United States has traditionally been a high divorce society, whereas in Spain divorce was not possible until 1981. The 1960s saw the beginning of a sharp increase in divorce

rates in many countries, but they have stabilized or even decreased since. In others, such as Spain and Turkey, the increase began later. In Japan, divorce was more common at the beginning of the 20th century than midcentury (Goode, 1963). Finally, the figure shows the temporal fluctuation in the crude divorce rate: it has spiked after the Second World War (Pavalko & Elder, 1990) and after major liberalizations in divorce legislation.

Despite the limitations of the crude divorce rate measure, its overall trend corresponds with a long-term increase in marital instability at the individual level. Approximately every fifth American marriage contracted in the 1950s had ended in divorce by 25 years after the wedding, whereas about a half of all couples who married in the 1970s or later are expected to divorce (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Increasing numbers of children have experienced the split-up of their parents and the simultaneous increases in divorce and declines in mortality has meant that family dissolution has replaced parental death as the leading cause for single parenthood (e.g., Bygren, Gähler & Neramo, 2004).

What accounts for these trends and cross-national variations? As a first step in explaining social change, demographers distinguish between cohort effects and period effects. Cohort effects refer to differences between groups of people who shared a critical experience during the same time interval (Alwin & McCammon, 2003). Cohort is often used as a short hand for birth cohort, but demographers use it in a more general sense. Divorce researchers talk about marriage cohorts when referring to those marrying during the same year. Marriage cohort effects arise when the conditions surrounding the beginning of the marital journey shape couples' marital expectations and behaviors throughout their marriages (e.g., Preston & McDonald, 1979). Cohort effects are responsible for divorce trends to the extent that new marriage cohorts with new attitudes and practices replace earlier ones.

Period effects, in turn, refer to influences which (at least potentially) affect all marriages, regardless of when the couples married; they are ‘something in the air’ (Cherlin, 1992). They include economic recessions, legal reforms, and cultural trends. Since period effects include not only gradually evolving social trends but also abrupt shifts such as changes in divorce laws, they have more potential to cause sudden increases or decreases in divorce. Divorce researchers generally agree that period effects dominate over cohort effects (Thornton & Rodgers, 1987; Cherlin, 1992; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). Therefore, to understand divorce trends, we must look into factors that at least potentially affect all marriages.

The initial increases in divorce took social scientists by surprise (Cherlin, 1992) and even now, there is no single explanation of why divorce rates have increased, or vary cross-nationally. Suggested explanations range from economic trends to cultural shifts and legal changes. Many explanations point to the change in gender roles—from gender asymmetry to increasing gender symmetry and equality—and, in particular, to the dramatic increases in married women’s labour market activity. Indeed, the trends in female employment and in divorce rates have closely followed one another (Cherlin, 1992; Ruggles, 1997) and a positive relationship between the two is also visible across countries (Kalmijn, 2007). Most researchers have interpreted the causality to run from female employment to divorce. A problem with this interpretation is that, as will be discussed in the next section, the micro-level evidence regarding this link is not conclusive (Özcan & Breen, 2012). Other economic explanations have focused on the relative deterioration of men’s economic fortunes in many countries, but neither of these can explain the big picture (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007).

Other theories emphasize cultural changes (e.g., Lesthaeghe, 1995; Coontz, 2005; Cherlin, 2009). A popular account is provided by the second demographic transition thesis

(Lesthaeghe, 1995), which links the changes in family behaviour to the increases in individualism and other postmaterial values. There has been a shift in family attitudes towards more gender equality, personal fulfillment, and acceptance of non-traditional family behaviours, such as divorce (Thornton & Young-De Marco, 2001). This shift has been very uneven across the Western world and major cross-national variation in the acceptance of divorce remains (Gelissen, 2003).

These new ideas fit squarely with traditional views of marriage and family life which were based on rigid roles and sharp gender inequalities, and emphasized the married couple as a single unit, rather than a partnership of two individuals (Coontz, 2005). However, as with explanations having to do with attitudes more generally, there is a chicken-and-egg problem of which came first, attitudes or behaviour? Divorce attitudes often seemed to adjust to changing realities instead of providing the initial push to increased divorce (even though liberalized attitudes may have made later divorces easier and more common) (Cherlin, 1992). More generally, testing these explanations is often difficult and constrained by the availability of relevant cross-national data over long periods of time. Some scholars have used religiosity as a measure of cultural acceptance of divorce and found secularization to correlate positively with divorce rates (e.g., Kalmijn, 2010). In an interesting study in Brazil, Chong and La Ferrera (2009) found that the spread of *telenovelas* in that country was followed by increases in divorce, presumably as couples become increasingly exposed to new ideas about family life. Even though the explanatory power of cultural influences on divorce is difficult to assess, the spread of new ideas and attitudes is likely to have contributed to the increases in family instability.

Divorce laws have changed markedly through the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Divorce was prohibited until recently in several Western countries (for example, Italy

legalized divorce in 1974, Spain in 1981, Ireland in 1997, and Malta in 2011) and is difficult to obtain in others. Often, divorces could be granted on the basis of serious fault (such as adultery, violence, or mental illness) or possibly, by the mutual consent of the spouses (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006). Even then, the process was usually expensive and lengthy. Major liberalization of divorce laws began in the sixties and seventies, and in 1970, California was the first state to implement unilateral ‘no fault’ divorce, in which either spouse could exit the marriage without having to provide specific reasons. Sweden followed suit in 1974, and by the turn of the millennium, most Western countries had liberalized their divorce legislation (Gonzalez & Viitanen, 2009).

Do these legislative changes affect divorce rates, or do they merely reflect the rising acceptance of and demand for divorce? Recent research has generally concluded that liberalization of divorce laws did cause short-term spikes in divorce rates (see, for example, Sweden in 1974 in Figure 1), presumably as spouses in ill-functioning marriages took advantage of the better opportunities for exiting their marriages (Wolfers, 2006; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007; González & Viitanen, 2009). According to many, these effects were not lasting and the long-term effect of the liberalization of divorce laws was, at most, a small increase in divorce rates (however, see González & Viitanen, 2009). Loosening of official control over marriages and divorces did, however, change the divorce process and the dynamics of marriages. Unilateral divorce—the possibility of exiting a marriage without the consent of one’s spouse—shifted the power balance to the spouse more willing to exit, while the shortening of the legal process and the weakening need to show fault or “irreconcilability” have made divorce processes faster and possibly less conflict-ridden (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007).

All in all, social scientists have had difficulties in explaining the increases in divorce. All available explanations have limitations. An interpretation of the trends is that values have changed and reorientations provide the social opportunities and subjective motives for divorce, whereas changes in women's economic independence has been among the factors providing the means for doing so (Cherlin, 2009). Together, these changes meant that people were more ready, willing, and able to divorce (Coale, 1973; Sandström, 2012).

If social scientists were unable to foresee an increase in divorce, they were equally unable to predict the recent stabilization of marriages in many countries. These developments—see Figure 1—are not merely due to the limitations of crude divorce measures. There has been a corresponding leveling, and even decrease in underlying marital instability. This has been clear in the United States since the 1980s (Goldstein, 1999; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007), but also found in other countries, such as Sweden (Andersson & Kolk, 2011). Marriages, of course, must take for there to be divorce, and thus many scholars have looked at the characteristics of marrying couples for clues regarding recent stabilization in divorce rates. One of the issues here has been on the increases in the age at marriage. As will be discussed below, older age at marriage is associated with lower divorce risk, and this has been found to contribute to the stabilization of marriage in the United States (Heaton, 2002). Increases in educational levels are another contributing factor. Additionally, increases in non-marital cohabitation (which are more likely to dissolve) can mask the overall instability of couple relationships (Raley & Bumpass, 2003).

Who divorces? The predictors of divorce

Above I discussed findings regarding trends in divorce over time and cross-national variation in divorce rates. Divorce trends were seen to be primarily caused by period effects, by something that 'is in the air' as Andrew Cherlin (1992: 31) has described it. However, just as everyone does not get rich during an economic boom or does not get the flu during an epidemic, not all marriages end in divorce and there are systematic differences in which do and which do not.

When asked why did Mrs and Mr Jones divorce, many would give reasons such as growing apart, they were never suited to each other, they were always arguing, or perhaps infidelity. A large body of research has investigated the proximate and psychological factors that may lead to divorce (Bradbury, Finchman & Beach, 2000). Unsurprisingly, low marital satisfaction is a strong predictor of divorce and infidelity, while incompatibility, and behavioural and relationship problems rank high among the reasons people given for their divorces (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Amato & Previti, 2003; De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). Interestingly, De Graaf and Kalmijn (2006) observed that in the Netherlands, strong reasons for divorce, such as infidelity or violence, have become less often cited, whereas psychological and relational problems, and reasons to do with the division of housework, have increased in importance. These findings are in line with ideas of marital change towards a partnership between equal individuals respecting their personal needs (Coontz, 2005; Cherlin, 2009). Despite its interest, I will not discuss further the psychological literature on divorce, but instead turn to the importance of more sociological factors.

We know a good deal about the socioeconomic and demographic predictors of divorce (for recent reviews, see Amato, 2000; 2010; Amato & James, 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). Even though the strength of the different predictors may vary from one country and time

period to the next (Wagner & Weiß, 2006), many point in similar directions regardless of context (Amato & James, 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010).

Whether a couple divorces or not is related to the life course stages and prior experiences of the partners. Young couples, for instance, have been consistently shown to have higher divorce rates due to their lower (psychological and socioeconomic) maturity, potentially unreasonable expectations, and a shorter search that led to an unstable match or the better outside options (alternative partners) these partners might face (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010).

Having been previously married also predicts divorce and generally, the more prior partnerships one has accumulated, the higher the divorce risk (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Teachman, 2008). This finding has been commonly explained by selection into further marriage: one has to divorce before marrying for the second time, and those who divorced once would be more likely to do it again (Poortman & Lyngstad, 2007). A similar selection explanation has been used to explain why couples who cohabited before marrying are more likely to divorce, even though one might expect the opposite given that such couples have more experience and information about each other and life together (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Amato, 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). According to this explanation, couples who cohabited are less traditional and may have different ideals and expectations of marriage. Some scholars, however, have proposed that experience of cohabitation may actually increase divorce risk by undermining commitment to marriage as the context for sexual relationships and childbearing (Thomson & Collella, 1992) or through relationship inertia through which relatively incompatible cohabiting couples may drift into marriage as the barriers to ending the relationship accumulate with shared possessions and, possibly, children (Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006).

Divorce risk is not constant through the course of marriage. While few marriages dissolve soon after the wedding, the likelihood of it happening increases through the first years. Marital satisfaction generally declines over the course of marital life (Umberson et al., 2005) and couples have the highest risk of divorcing between the fourth and the seventh year after the wedding. After this, divorce risk begins to decline gradually as couples accumulate investments in their marriage which increase the barriers for leaving it (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010).

One such barrier is children. Theoretically, children can be regarded as shared investments (Becker, Landes & Michael, 1977; Brines & Joyner, 1999) and parents can forgo, or at least postpone their divorce, if they are concerned with its adverse effects on their children. Indeed, couples with children, especially small ones, have lower divorce risks than childless couples (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). Again, this may reflect the characteristics of the couples who do not have children, as they might have lower trust in their marriages to begin with. Whether having children actually stabilizes marriages seems, on the other hand, to depend on country and time period (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010). Some research even suggests that having boys can have a stronger stabilizing effect (Morgan, Lye & Condran, 1988), presumably due to fathers' increased involvement in childcare. However, this finding remains contested. Having children can also destabilize on marriages if it means less time for fostering the relationship (Twenge, Campbell & Foster, 2004), which, as discussed, has become increasingly important in modern marriages.

Socioeconomic factors related to divorce have been widely discussed in the literature. The starting point for practically all research is that husbands' and wives' socioeconomic resources have different influences. This assumption is often based on an economic approach to family life, which sees economic resources as an exchange for unpaid domestic work and in

which husbands' and wives' roles are complementary (Becker, Landes & Michael, 1977; Becker, 1981). In practice, this perspective predicts that men's socio-economic resources—such as education, employment, and earnings—stabilize marriages whereas wives' resources destabilize them. While this prediction has found general support in research in regard to men's resources (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010), findings are less consistent when it comes to the influence of wives' resources. The relationship between female education and marital stability is a case in point. In the United States, women with higher levels of education have had lower rates of divorce for a long time and this gap has grown (Martin, 2006). In many other countries, highly educated women used to have higher divorce rates. But over time, less educated women have seen their divorce risks increase at a faster rate and currently they are as, or more, likely to divorce in several countries (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006). These developments are in line with the Goode hypothesis, which maintains that the initially high social, legal and economic barriers to divorce kept it the privilege of those with high enough resources to overcome them (Goode, 1962). As these barriers have reduced, divorce has become accessible to those with fewer resources, who are often those under more economic and other marital stress. Similar discrepancies can be seen in the research on female employment and marital instability (Amato, 2010; Amato & James, 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Özcan & Breen, 2012). Earlier predictions were that female employment may destabilize marriages as it weakens the benefits from a household division of labour (Becker, Landes & Michael, 1977; Becker, 1991), improves opportunities for maintaining independent households (England & Farkas, 1986), and chances to meet new partners (South & Lloyd, 1995). Many empirical findings supported this.

Predictions of the de-stabilizing effect of female employment and earnings have, however, been increasingly questioned. Many have argued that female employment can stabilize

partnerships by strengthening families' economic security and balancing the spouses' roles and responsibilities (Oppenheimer, 1997), or claimed that the expectation of divorce may actually lead to increases in wives' employment, rather than the opposite (Özcan & Breen, 2012). Furthermore, wives' employment and earnings may help them exit dysfunctional marriages rather than destabilizing all marriages (Sayer & Bianchi, 2000; Sayer et al., 2011), or have destabilizing effects only if they do not adhere to values of the couple (Amato et al., 2007) or the surrounding society (Cooke, 2006). An additional modifier of these effects is public policy. Female employment can stabilize on marriages in countries with policies which support work-family balance (Cooke et al., 2011). Overall, then, the effects of female economic activity are much more contingent than previously thought.

Women, however, have practically always and everywhere been more likely to file for divorce and start the process leading to divorce. This remarkably stable finding seems to be found for every society where such statistics exist, Western and non-Western alike (Mignot, 2009). Exceptions have been during major wars and their aftermaths. Many findings furthermore suggest that women's divorce filings are more closely related to socioeconomic factors (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Sayer et al., 2011; Boertien, 2012) and women are more likely to name relational and psychological motives for their divorces (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). Men, on the other hand, appear less likely to initiate divorce when the couple has young children (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Hewitt, 2009), possibly reflecting an anticipation of weaker post-divorce contact with their children.

Increases in international migration have spurred interest into the family lives of migrant groups. Migration as a major life event can itself have a divorce-inducing effect, especially since one of the spouses can benefit from the move more than the other (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010).

Migrant groups can find themselves landing in a society in which marital mores and divorce rates differ noticeably from those in their country of origin. In particular, much of the migration flows to the Western countries are from societies with less divorce and exposure to the new environment can entail increases in divorce rates of these groups (Landale & Ogena, 1995; Qureshi, Charsley & Shaw, 2012). At the same time, these groups may keep features of their countries of origin and in general, one finds major differences in marital stability between different groups (Kalmijn, 2011; Qureshi, Charsley & Shaw, 2012). Increased immigration has led to an increase in the number and share of marriages between migrant groups and the indigenous population, and between migrant groups themselves. While intermarriage is commonly regarded as a sign of integration, such exogamous marriages face higher dissolution rates, which are the higher the further apart the spouses are culturally (Dribe & Lundh, 2012).

Consequences of divorce

One of the main concerns of the increase in divorce has been its effects on the well-being of children and adults. These questions have aroused major interest among social and psychological scientists and many conclusions have been remarkably conflicting (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Cherlin, 1999). What can we say about the effects of divorce and family dissolution on adults and children?

Most studies conclude that divorcees and their children fare worse according to several indicators of psychological, physical and socioeconomic well-being compared to those who did not experience divorce (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009; Amato & James, 2010). Findings of these effects range from heightened poverty levels (Callens & Croux, 2009) and lower educational performance of the children of divorce (e.g., Garriga & Härkönen,

2009; Amato & James, 2010) to increased occurrence of psychological distress (Amato and Keith 1991) and many physical health conditions (Amato & James, 2010).

Does the experience of divorce itself cause these differences? Couples who break up differ from those remaining together in many respects. They are generally less happy and often more conflicting and they also differ in terms of socioeconomic resources and many demographic characteristics. All these can themselves affect well-being and divorcing couples and their children might have fared worse even without the divorce. Indeed, those who remain in unhappy marriages fare worse in terms of life satisfaction than those who dissolved their unhappy marriages (Hawkins & Booth, 2005).

Since the golden tool for addressing causality—the randomized experiment—is for obvious reasons out of the question when assessing the effects of divorce, researchers are left to various second-best alternatives. Furthermore, since divorce is not simply a snapshot event but rather a (potentially long-lasting) process, it can be even conceptually challenging to separate divorce effects (i.e., divorce-as-event-effects) from the effects of the preceding process (Amato, 2000; 2010), as discussed in the Introduction.

Despite the difficulties, several scholars have used various sophisticated methods to assess this issue. A common conclusion is that divorce can indeed affect the well-being and performance of adults and children alike, even though the effects are not necessarily large nor long-lasting, and tend to show a great deal of heterogeneity (Amato, 2000; 2010; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009).

Take the example of the effects on the well-being of adults. Despite the sadness, upset and feelings of loss associated with divorce, it can also be a relief to at least one of the partners, often for the one who has most wanted to separate (e.g., Wang & Amato, 2004). In many

instances, psychological well-being tends to decrease already years prior to the divorce itself, stressing the processual nature of marital dissolution (Mastekaasa, 1994; Amato, 2000). In general, the adjustment of divorcees shows major variation, with some individuals managing to adjust to the new situation relatively fast, while for others divorce represents a longer-term, chronic problem from which they might never fully recover (Amato, 2000; 2010; Amato & James, 2010).

Whether divorce leads to declines in well-being depends on the nature of the marriage from which the partners are leaving. Divorcees who end a high-conflict marriage often experience less decline and even an increase in well-being, whereas those whose marriage was characterized by low conflict and relatively high satisfaction often experience more loss in well-being (Kalmijn & Monden, 2006; Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Furthermore, adjustment to divorce depends on various socioeconomic and interpersonal resources, such as employment, income, social support, and whether one has a new partner (Gähler 1998; Wang & Amato, 2004). It also depends on the broader societal context and divorce effects are weaker in countries in which family support is stronger and in which divorce is more common (Kalmijn, 2010). Finally, there are no consistent gender differences in the subjective well-being consequences of divorce (even though men seem to suffer greater physical health decline) (Amato & James, 2010).

Divorce can have important economic consequences, especially for women (DiPrete and McManus, 2000; McManus & DiPrete, 2001; Uunk, 2004). Economic dependency in the former marriage tends to lead to larger economic losses following divorce, whereas the sole or main economic providers may even gain economically (McManus & DiPrete, 2001). On the other hand, welfare state arrangements that provide income support and support the employment of divorced mothers ameliorate the negative economic consequences of family dissolution (DiPrete

& McManus, 2000; Uunk, 2004). Despite the variation in the economic consequences of divorce, it is among the main life events that can lead to poverty (Callens & Croux, 2009).

There has been even more concern on the effects of family dissolution on children. Over time, views have ranged from major long-term negative effects on children's emotional and socioeconomic well-being to claims of no effects at all (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Cherlin, 1999). Empirical findings support neither view. Children of divorce generally fare worse in terms of emotional and educational outcomes, but the effects are, on average, small or modest (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato & Booth, 1997; Cherlin, 1999; Amato, 2000; 2010; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009; Amato & James, 2010).

These negative outcomes are already present some while before the parental divorce (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1991; Sanz-de-Galdeano & Vuri, 2007; Kim, 2011), underlining the above mentioned difficulty in separating the effects of divorce from the processes leading to it. Growing up in a high-conflict family can in itself have negative effects on children's well-being and socioeconomic outcomes, and in such cases parental divorce may actually have positive effects (Amato, Spencer Loomis & Booth, 1995; Amato & Booth, 1997; Cherlin, 1999; Dronkers, 1999; Booth & Amato, 2004). However, children whose parents ended a low-conflict marriage fare generally worse than those whose parents remained together. The effects of parental divorce on children's outcomes thus vary in the same ways as the effects on divorcing adults and small or modest average effects hide considerable underlying variation.

The effects of parental divorce depend on the immediate economic consequences and the general instability surrounding family dissolutions, which can have repercussions particularly on academic achievement (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Thomson, Hanson & McLanahan, 1994; Amato, 2000). Major drops in economic well-being, frequent residential moves, changes in the

social environment and other instability generating factors have the potential to undermine children's outcomes. Some similar effects have been found for parental re-partnering, which often can lead to new separations (Amato, 2010; Sweeney, 2010). Economic resources do not explain all of the effects of parental divorce and psychological and relationship factors play an important role in explaining the effects of parental divorce. The adjustment of the parents themselves and their parenting practices during and after the divorce process contribute to the adjustment of their children, as does the overall quality of the relationships the children maintain to both of their parents. For these reasons, parental divorce can affect child outcomes even in well-developed welfare states (Gähler, 1997; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009; Amato & James, 2010).

Parental divorce often causes increased levels of anxiety during the divorce process, which can be exacerbated by stress it lays on parents and their capability to engage in effective parenting. For many children, however, these effects are relatively short-lived as many adjust to the new situation reasonably well over time (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cherlin, 1999; Amato, 2000; 2010; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). For others, it may present a source of more chronic strain from which they never fully recover. One of the avenues through which parental divorce can have long-term effects on children's life courses is through educational attainment. If parental divorce disturbs the child's educational career—for example, through affecting their economic or psychological well-being, relationships with her parents, teachers or friends—this disturbance may translate into lower levels of socioeconomic attainment and physical and psychological well-being in adulthood (Garriga & Härkönen, 2009; Amato & James, 2010).

Another long-term effect of parental divorce concerns the family life experiences of the children themselves. A well-documented finding is the intergenerational transmission of divorce:

children of divorce are more prone to divorce themselves as they may hold interpersonal skills that are not conducive to marital stability or are more likely to perceive divorce as a viable solution to marital problems (Wolfinger, 2005; Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008). Parental divorce can also weaken contacts between children, their parents and their grandparents (Aquilino, 1994; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009; Albertini & Garriga, 2011). These negative effects are particularly likely for the relationships between children and their fathers and the fathers' kin. This is not surprising given the still-prevalent custody arrangements and women's role as kin-keepers. Finally, even if parental divorce generally has weak long-term effects on clinical indicators of psycho-emotional well-being, such as depression and anxiety disorders, this does not mean that many children of divorce would not experience feelings of sadness and loss even a long time after the parental separation (Amato, 2010).

One might expect that the effects of parental divorce have weakened as divorce rates have increased, its stigma decreased, and parents and societies have developed strategies to cope with its consequences. Maybe surprisingly, there is no strong evidence to support this belief (Ely et al., 2000; Amato, 2001; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009). However, one noticeable change in children's post-divorce conditions concerns their custody arrangements. In many countries, legal and practical joint custody arrangements have become more common, and in some cases even the norm. The limited number of studies on the topic does not permit strong conclusions, but existing findings suggest that joint custody can have positive effects on several well-being outcomes. Increasing joint custody can also weaken the negative effects of divorce on father-child relationships (Bauserman, 2002; Bjarnarson & Arnarsson 2011).

Summing up, divorce has the potential to cause major disruption in the lives of adults and children, and the effects can be long-lasting. However, by far not everyone experiences long-

lasting negative effects, most people adjust well over time and for some, divorce may be beneficial (Cherlin, 1999; Amato, 2000). Regarding children's adjustment, Paul Amato and Spencer James (2010: 9) summarized that "children function reasonably well after divorce if their standard of living does not decline dramatically, their resident mothers are psychologically well adjusted and engage in high-quality parenting, they maintain close ties to fathers, and their parents avoid conflict and engage in at least a minimal level of cooperation in the postdivorce years".

The discussion thus far has concerned effects of divorce for those individuals who experience it. Rising divorce rates can also affect those who did not experience divorce: living in a high divorce (risk) society may itself affect behavior and well-being. Lower obstacles for leaving partnerships improve the chances of doing so and can empower partners—especially the weaker partner—to bargain for a better deal. Liberalization of divorce laws (the adoption of unilateral divorce) has decreased rates of female suicide, domestic violence, and females murdered by their spouses (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2006). These new laws gave partners, and women especially, the chance to improve their relationship or optionally leave a potentially disruptive (and even lethal) one. Facing the prospect of divorce can encourage partners to protect against its consequences, for example by improving one's position in the labor market (Özcan & Breen, 2012) or by saving more (Gonzalez & Özcan, 2008). Children may also be affected. Those who grew up under a liberal divorce regime had weaker well-being outcomes according to various indicators (Gruber, 2004) and children exposed to peers with divorced parents have been found to fare poorer in school (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thomson, 2003).

Discussion

Divorce rates have increased throughout the Western countries and beyond during the last decades and these trends are considered key components of family change. Yet these developments have been uneven and occurred at different times in different countries; furthermore, in many countries divorce rates have stabilized and even decreased in more recent years. Divorce has become a part of the family institution and a realistic possibility which spouses need to take into consideration when marrying. Though less stigmatized than previously, divorce can still cause major distress and disruption to the adults and children who experience it. The possibility of experiencing divorce, and contact with people who have, can in themselves shape behaviours and experiences.

What will the future look like? As discussed above, the initial increases in divorce rates took many social scientists by surprise, as have the recent trends towards marital stability in some countries. Therefore, it is clearly difficult to foresee in which countries divorce rates will continue to increase and in which marriages will become more stable. The increases in unmarried cohabitation pose another challenge, as divorce rates have become an ever weaker indicator of couple relationship instability. Despite some indications that the retreat from marriage may have stalled in some of the countries where it started first (Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011), it seems unlikely that marriage will recover the same centrality in family life as it had in the previous decades.

Overall, there are considerable uncertainties in attempts to predict future rates of divorce and couple relationship instability. To the extent that the increases in divorce and instability reflected incompatibilities between prevailing family institutions and changing society, it is possible that divorce rates will stabilize and decline if social practices and institutions adapt to

the changing circumstances. Such declines in divorce have occurred before. As briefly mentioned above, divorce in Japan was more common at the beginning of the twentieth century than some decades later, which was interpreted as reflecting adaptation of family life to broader societal changes (Goode, 1963). In the Western countries, an important candidate for change is gender roles. The changes in gender roles were to a large extent driven by changes in women's roles and activities, whereas men have been much slower in taking up previously female tasks. An increase in men's willingness to do their share in the household may thus lead to increased family stability as this would fit better the increasingly prevailing egalitarian ideals of partnerships and marriage as a union of two equals with their individual needs (cf. Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2012). However, even if rates of divorce and family instability were to decline, it is likely that the previous era of stable marriages and nuclear families will not return in the near future.

Can policies affect family instability and help adults and children who experience it adjust to it better? Above, I pointed out that many of the findings regarding the effects of divorce legislation on divorce rates do not suggest that such laws have major long-term effects on divorce rates. Thus, a shift towards stricter regulation of marriages may not have the desired effect, especially since much of modern family life occurs outside the institution of marriage. How effective can policies be in helping adults and children adjust successfully to the divorce experience? Many traditional social policies, such as income transfers and policies aimed at helping (single) mothers find and keep employment can be effective in combating the financial consequences of divorce, which are generally reduced in the generous welfare states such as the Nordic countries (Uunk, 2004). This can itself be an important policy goal and help divorcees and their children adjust by decreasing the importance of one of the stressors which often follow

divorce. However, they may not be enough as many of the influences of divorce function through psychological stressors and their effects on parenting and other social relationships. To target these factors, counseling programs aimed at easing such stressors and helping with parenting can be effective (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

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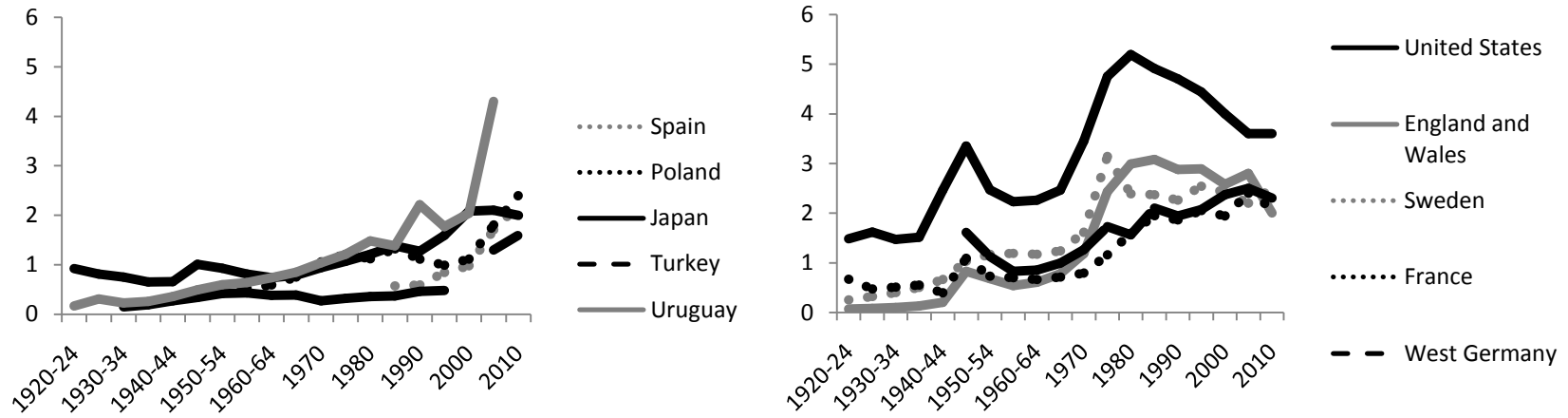
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Figure 1 Crude divorce rates in selected countries, 1920-2010.



Sources: United Nations (various years); National Center for Health Statistics (various years).