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Review Article

A review of the antecedents of union dissolution

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A review of the antecedents of union dissolution

Torkild Hovde Lyngstad¹

Marika Jalovaara²

Abstract

The question of what factors contribute to the stability of coresidential partnerships has attracted the attention of many social scientists. This study summarizes recent research on the determinants of union dissolution within a set of substantive themes. Special emphasis is placed on the past two decades of research. European as well as American contributions are considered.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we offer a brief review of research into the social, demographic, and economic factors that contribute to the dissolution of coresidential relationships. In contemporary industrialized societies, the break-up of a coresidential relationship is an increasingly common life course event (Andersson and Philipov 2002), and it is consequential both for adults and children (Amato 2000).

Our focus is chiefly on demographic research on antecedents of separation (moving apart) and divorce. While many of the studies to date have concentrated on the dissolution of marriages rather than of cohabiting unions—mainly because there is less data on unmarried couples who live together—a larger body of literature on cohabiting unions is emerging. A related line of research focusing on more subjective and psychological factors, such as union quality and marital interactions, will not be summarized in this paper. Very good reviews of these research areas are available (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000; Gottman and Notarius 2000). Moreover, the present summary is, for the most part, restricted to studies published in international peer-reviewed journals.

The most recent article that provided a broad summary of dissolution determinants covered the period up to the year 1990, and focused on American contributions (White 1990). Indeed, much of what we then knew about factors that influence the propensity to divorce was based on American research. In recent decades, research on the antecedents of union dissolution has expanded significantly, especially in Europe. We exclude studies that primarily relate to less developed countries.

Most of this research is, either explicitly or implicitly, based on a micro-level theory of individual choice and couple-level bargaining. The early work by Gary Becker and colleagues (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977) assumed a unitary household utility function, while later economic theory has more explicitly acknowledged that men and women may have differing incentives/disincentives (Lundberg and Pollak 1996). Meanwhile, sociologists have formulated theories explicitly including structural and cultural constraints (Levinger 1976, Brines and Joyner 1999, South, Trent, and Shen 2001). Whether it is completely tacit or it is formulated in terms of either microeconomics or rational actor-based sociology, there seems to be an agreement that the dissolution process involves *some variant of* utility maximization. This has been called the utilitarian synthesis by Brines and Joyner (1999). To augment the idea of utility maximization, various additional theoretical ideas have been invoked by researchers. These ideas connect the partners with, for example, their childhood experiences, their own union and childbearing histories, the resources brought into the partnership, their integration into labour markets, the organization of domestic life, and the social surroundings.

The paper is organized in sections, with each covering one strand of research on factors related to union dissolution. In some subfields, there is plenty of research; whereas in others, our knowledge is rather sparse. A brief conclusion also comments on trends in union dissolution research.

2. Age, period, and cohort

The basic time dimensions of union dissolution—namely, the spouses' ages, the duration of their union, the period, and the union cohort (the time the partners moved in together or married)—were given more attention in the 1980s than they are now.

The increase in divorce risk over (historical) time can be a cohort-driven phenomenon: different cohorts may bring, for example, different experiences, resources, and expectations to their unions, and these differences may translate into higher divorce risks for younger cohorts. But the increase can also be a period-driven phenomenon, in which the same social forces affect various cohorts at the same time. An example of the latter would be that, because the normative constraints on divorce weaken over time, the risk of divorce tends to also increase for those who have entered their union under a more restrictive normative climate. Research from both Finland (Lutz, Wils, and Nieminen 1991) and the United States (Teachman 2002) suggests that the effect of period strongly dominates the effect of marriage cohort. One American study has, however, found a cohort effect, net of period, by controlling for macro-social indicators, such as women's educational attainment (Ono 1999).

Age at marriage is consistently found to have a strong impact on the propensity to separate or divorce, with lower ages at marriage being associated with higher risks of marital disruption (Heaton 1991; Teachman 2002). Research suggests that the association can be partly explained by confounding factors, such as parental divorce and low educational attainment (Kiernan 1986). The literature provides various theoretical arguments, both psychological and sociological, that may account for the remaining effect of age at marriage. For example, researchers have argued that young people tend to be less mature and to make less forward-looking decisions, or that engaging in a short search on the marriage market may result in a relatively poor match (South 1995). Younger partners are also presumed to have more alternatives to their current relationship, and to be more prone to experience changes in their situations that affect the relationship. If early marriage is an indication of an insufficient search of the marriage market for a suitable spouse, those who married young will be more prone to divorce, as they are more likely to encounter a potential new partner. An American study found no support for this hypothesis (South 1995).

It has been suggested that the inverse association between age at marriage and marital dissolution might not hold at higher ages. This could be because, as single women hear their biological clock ticking, they may settle for a less-than-optimal partner because they wish to have children. Some evidence to support this hypothesis has been provided by researchers in the United States (Lehrer 2008).

As the spouses age, they gain more personal maturity, which might make their unions more stable, and they might also encounter fewer potential partners for a new union, as their peers are less likely to be single. If it is found that current, running age also plays a role, it might be more appropriate to include in models of dissolution rates a variable of current age, rather than of age at entry into the union. However, because spouses' current ages and union duration are collinear, and because an efficient estimation of both effects requires richer and larger data sets than those that are usually available, this is seldom done. The idea that current age is a better predictor of divorce than age at marriage is nonetheless supported by one study from Finland (Lutz, Wils, and Nieminen 1991).

3. Union type, union order, and same-sex unions

When a couple decides to form a union, they can choose whether to move in together as cohabitants, or to get married before they start a joint household. After members of a given cohort have started to pair off and move in together, a continuous flow of cohabiting couples entering into marriage follows over the years. There is great variation among countries in these rates. In some countries, cohabitation is the modal pathway into marriage, while in others, this is no longer the case (Kiernan 2004; Kiernan 2001). Cohabitants have very low fertility in some countries, whereas, for example, in the Nordic countries and France, a large proportion of first births are to cohabiting mothers (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). There is also some evidence of socioeconomic gradients in these choices. For example, in the United States, cohabiting parents have on average lower socioeconomic status than married parents (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004).

The rates of dissolution are generally higher for cohabitants than for married couples, even if the partners have common children (Andersson 2002; Andersson and Philipov 2002; Berrington 2001; Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003; Jensen and Clausen 2003; Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004; Raley and Wildsmith 2004; Wu and Musick 2008). To the extent that lower levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment to the union keep cohabitants from marrying, the difference can be explained by self-selection of more stable unions from cohabitation into marriage. However, causal effects of getting or being married might also be involved, such as

effects of going through the marriage ritual itself, more social support or pressure to stay together, and so on. We do not know very much about these potential causal effects of union type on the rate of dissolution. There is, however, a growing body of literature that reports causal effects of marital status on other outcomes, such as earnings and hours worked (Thomas and Sawhill 2002, Waite 1995); and these effects might in turn produce lower dissolution rates for married couples.

According to the search theory, couples who cohabit before getting married should have a lower subsequent risk of divorce than those who marry directly without having cohabited. During the premarital cohabitation period, it is argued, partners gain information about each other and the union, and only the unions with good prospects will be converted to marriages (Brüderl and Kalter 2001). A large number of empirical studies have, using a variety of data and methods, reached the exact *opposite* conclusion: the risk of divorce is higher after premarital cohabitation (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Berrington and Diamond 1999; Demaris and Macdonald 1993; Demaris and Rao 1992; Hall and Zhao 1995; Haskey 1992; Hoem and Hoem 1992; Teachman and Polonko 1990; Thomson and Colella 1992). The usual explanation for this finding is that the higher risk is chiefly due to self-selection: people who marry directly have a lower risk of dissolving any union due to unobserved, stable-over-time characteristics, such as a strong attachment to religion or conservative family values. Other mechanisms may also be involved. For example, prolonged experience as a cohabitant may weaken a person's concept of marriage as a preferred institutional framework for a sexual relationship (Thomson and Colella 1992). This represents a potential causal effect of cohabitation on marital dissolution rates that would increase the risk of divorce.

Statistically advanced studies of marital dissolution, in which the choice of union type and dissolution risk is modelled jointly, and which should therefore account for the selectivity into marriage to some extent, show quite different results (Brüderl, Diekmann and Engelhardt 1997; Lillard, Brien and Waite 1995; Svarer 2004). Generally, they find that there is serious selection into cohabitation, and that this is the main factor that accounts for the higher divorce rate among premarital cohabitators.

Further, a recent comparative study of 16 countries reported that the risk of divorce for former cohabitators was higher than that of people who married directly only in countries where premarital cohabitation is either a small minority or a large majority phenomenon (Liefbroer and Dourlejin 2006). An Australian study showed that the excess risk of divorce associated with premarital cohabitation has changed dramatically with successive marriage cohorts, and found a negative effect for more recent marriage cohorts (Hewitt and De Vaus 2009).

With increasing dissolution rates, more and more people enter second and subsequent unions. We have known for a long time that the risk of divorce is higher for

second marriages than for first marriages (Martin and Bumpass 1989). Presumably, this is partly due to selection on unobserved characteristics. Studies that take such characteristics into account report that the selection out of first unions and into second unions is an important component of this higher risk (Poortman and Lyngstad 2007; Steele, Kallis; and Joshi 2006). Other suggested theoretical explanations for the higher divorce risk for higher-order unions include a lack of norms for post-dissolution family life, the role of step-children, experiences from the previous dissolution process, and the fact that second and subsequent unions are more likely to be cohabiting unions (Teachman 2008).

Same-sex unions have been given a legal framework similar to that of male-female marriages in several European countries since the early 1990s. Studies on these unions, conducted in Scandinavia and the Netherlands, have reported that the rate of divorce is higher for same-sex than for male-female marriages, and that female same-sex couples have the highest divorce rate (Andersson et al. 2006; Noack, Seierstad, and Weedon-Fekjær 2005). We also know that socioeconomic and demographic antecedents of divorce are fairly similar to those found for heterosexual marriages (Andersson et al. 2006; Kalmijn, Loewe, and Manting 2007).

4. Children

Having children is one of the main reasons why people form coresidential unions in the first place. Earlier contributions have usually found that having common children decreases the risk of divorce, at least when their number is limited to the usual low parities (Andersson 1997). The effect is at its strongest when the couple's children are very young, and wanes as they grow older (Waite and Lillard 1991).

Several theoretical links between childbearing and divorce have been suggested in the literature. Children are an example of so-called union-specific capital (Becker, Landes and Michael 1977). This means that the benefits gained from having children are bigger when the parents are living together than when they are not living together. Brines and Joyner (1999) have argued, on the basis of findings in experimental social psychology, that having children is a form of joint production that will increase the partners' commitment to the union. In addition, involuntary childlessness on the part of one or both partners may contribute to a higher dissolution risk among the childless. However, the lower divorce risk for couples with children is likely to be caused in part by selection, whereby spouses who have little trust in the continuity of their marriage are less likely to have children. Researchers from several countries have tried to address this problem by estimating the causal effects of having common children net of the selection component using different sophisticated statistical techniques (see, e.g.,

Lillard 1993). Judging from results reported from the United States, it seems that the couple's first child lowers the risk of divorce, whereas subsequent children have the opposite effect (Lillard and Waite 1993). Other studies using similar methods have concluded that second or later births reduce the risk of divorce in Italy and Spain, while in Denmark, a birth increases the risk of divorce (Coppola and Di Cesare 2008, Svarer and Verner 2006). Using multi-process methodology on British data, Steele et al. (2005) found that preschool children have a stabilizing effect on parents' married or cohabiting relationship, but also that the effect is weaker for older children.

In Sweden, the differences in divorce risk between childless women and mothers have diminished over the 1980s and 1990s (Andersson 1997). This could be a result of a change in the normative climate, in which norms prescribing that couples stay together for the sake of their children have weakened over time, but also of a change in the selection into marriage from cohabitation. As more couples have their first child in cohabitation, those who choose to marry while still childless could also be increasingly selected on, for example, being religious or having conservative family values. Steele et al. (2006) estimated the effect of parenthood on the outcomes of cohabiting relationships in the United Kingdom, and found that, for later cohorts, childbearing is increasingly compatible with cohabitation, but is less likely to lead to marriage.

A much-cited study from the United States reported that the divorce rate also depends on the sex composition of the couple's children: the risk of divorce was found to be lower for couples who had only male children than for couples who only had girls (Morgan, Lye and Condran 1988). The suggested explanation for this difference is the *father involvement hypothesis* (Katzev, Warner and Acock 1994), which states that fathers are more involved in the upbringing of their children if they have at least one son than they would be otherwise. The original finding, which alludes to the existence of gender preferences among parents in industrial societies (Andersson et al. 2006), was hailed as the most interesting finding in divorce research in the 1980s (White 1990). European researchers have not, however, been able to replicate it consistently. A study with superior data from Swedish registers found little systematic support for a lower divorce risk for couples with only sons, and suggested that the finding of Morgan, Lye, and Condran (1988) could be attributed to random variation in the data (Andersson and Woldemicael 2001). A comparative study of 16 European countries, Canada, and the United States repudiated the general hypothesis that sons contribute more to marital stability than daughters (Diekmann and Schmidheiny 2004).

Some other issues have also been clarified: couples with twins do not seem to have higher divorce rates than couples with two singletons (Walke 2002). Having a first birth within wedlock has been reported to decrease the risk of divorce in Norway and Sweden (Kravdal 1988; Liu 2002). This effect is most likely due to selection of

particularly stable couples into marriage before the first birth, as in these countries, the majority of first births are now to cohabiting mothers.

Studies from the Netherlands (Kalmijn and Poortman 2006) and Australia (Hewitt 2009) included data on whether the wife, the husband, or both took the initiative in the divorce process: the Dutch study concluded that children aged 0-6 had a stronger negative effect on the risk of husband-initiated divorce than on wife-initiated divorce or on divorce initiated by both partners. However, the Australian study found weak evidence that wives are less likely than husbands to initiate when they have infants, and that husbands are less likely than wives to initiate when children are school-age or older.

5. Educational attainment

Both in Europe and in America, the impact of the socioeconomic positions of the spouses on the risk of divorce has received considerable attention. There are several themes that emerge from this part of the literature. One of them deals with the impact of the educational attainment of the two spouses and the potential interaction effect between the two, which essentially represents the potential effect of educational homogamy. When considering the effect of education on union dissolution risk, it is important to keep in mind that various selection processes, as well as possible causal influences, together produce the educational gradient. In addition, educational attainment is correlated with earnings potential and labor market activity. Thus, most studies of education effects try, in some way or another, to separate the effects of education *per se* from the effects of spouses' incomes and their labor market activity status.

Almost all studies in which a definitive conclusion was reached reported a negative effect of the husband's level of formal education on the risk of divorce. Over the past few decades, Scandinavian studies—mostly based on large-*N* register data, which allow for the precise estimation of parameters—have consistently found negative effects of both spouses' educational attainments on the risk of divorce (Hoem 1997; Jalovaara 2001). In the United States, as well, a negative effect of the wife's level of education has been shown (Martin 2006; Ono 1998). The evidence from some European countries is more mixed. A study from the Netherlands reported a positive effect of the wife's higher education on the risk of divorce (Poortman and Kalmijn 2002), as did one Italian study (de Rose 1992). These differences may be assigned a normative explanation, such as the so-called Goode hypothesis. This hypothesis states that, in a society in which divorce is relatively infrequent and represents a notable breach of social norms, it might take more resources to dissolve a marriage (Goode

1962). The prediction is thus that the correlation between socioeconomic status and divorce risk shifts from being positive to negative over time if divorce rates increase. Several studies make reference to this hypothesis when studying the effect of educational attainment on divorce risk (Blossfeld et al. 1995; de Graaf and Kalmijn 2006; Hoem 1997; Härkönen and Dronkers 2006). Using multi-country data with differing divorce contexts, Blossfeld et al. (1995) found that education affected divorce rates differently in Sweden, West Germany, and Italy; and suggested that these countries are at different stages in a transition from a social context marked by low divorce rates, to one with high divorce rates. In Italy, the divorce rate has increased substantially over the last few years, and the Goode hypothesis leads us to expect that the educational gradient is turning negative. However, the most recent Italian study found higher divorce risks for women with university-level degrees (Vignoli and Ferro 2009). Recently, several European teams have found some support for the Goode hypothesis by estimating time-varying effects of educational attainment on divorce (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2006; Härkönen and Dronkers 2006). A similar study, but using American data, found no evidence for a changing effect of education across marriage cohorts (Teachman 2002).

Overall, homogamy, or similarity in partners' characteristics, is the norm in partner selection, and the usual hypothesis is that homogamy strengthens unions (Kalmijn 1998). Studies from Nordic countries have not found the risk of divorce to be especially high among educationally heterogamous couples (Finnäs 1997; Jalovaara 2003; Lyngstad 2004; Svarer and Verner 2006). In contrast, an earlier study from the United States reported a divorce-promoting effect of educational heterogamy (Tzeng 1992). There is also some evidence suggesting that changes in educational attainment during marriage increase the risk of divorce (Lyngstad 2004; Tzeng and Mare 1995). Generally, the effects of education are at their strongest early in the marriage (Jalovaara 2002).

6. Employment and income

How do spouses' employment and income affect marital stability? The point of departure for the great majority of studies focusing on this question is the Beckerian specialization model (Becker, Landes and Michael 1977). This model states that the gain from marriage is highest when the one of the spouses specializes in paid market work, and the other in nonmarket work (housework and care). Given the persistence of historical gender roles and a gender wage gap, this means that we should expect to see a lower divorce risk when the husband specializes in market work, and the wife in domestic production and reproduction (or works part-time at most). The divorce-

promoting effect of the wife's greater resources is referred to as the 'independence effect.' The wife's resources also add to the total resources of the family, which should increase marital stability (the 'income effect'), but the independence effect is thought to outweigh any advantages (Ross and Sawhill 1975). To most readers, the specialization model seems anachronistic in contemporary Western societies. It has been widely criticized (see, e.g., Sayer and Bianchi 2000), and an alternative model has been proposed, in which the utility is highest when both partners contribute economically to the household (Oppenheimer 1997).

American studies offer mixed evidence of an independence effect of women's earnings. A non-linear relationship between the wife's income and union stability is not uncommonly encountered (Heckert, Nowak, and Snyder 1998; Ono 1998; Rogers 2004), and the results seem to depend on whether the focus is on the wife's absolute income, or on her relative contribution to the total family income (Rogers 2004). In Europe, most contributions have tended to support the independence effect (see, e.g., Bukodi and Robert 2003; Chan and Halpin 2002; Henz and Jonsson 2003; Tjøtta and Vaage 2003), but there are also studies that have found negative effects on dissolution rates of the wife's income (Svarer and Verner 2006). The independence hypothesis also holds when other correlates of the female's socioeconomic status or economic potential, such as occupational class and educational attainment, are controlled for effectively (Jalovaara 2001). A study using Finnish register data from the early 1990s estimated relative divorce risks for combinations of the spouses' levels of income. The husband's high income decreased the risk, and the wife's high income increased it, regardless of the level of the other spouse's income, but the divorce-promoting effect of the wife's high income was especially strong when the husband's income was low (Jalovaara 2003).

Many scholars have argued that the wife's economic resources do not undermine the quality or gains of marriage, but that the presence of these resources may lower a barrier for her to leave a troubled marriage. There is empirical support for this view from studies that include measures of marital quality or happiness (Sayer and Bianchi 2000; Schoen et al. 2002). Further, a recent Dutch study found that the divorce-promoting effect of the wife being employed was stronger when she reported having initiated the dissolution process (Kalmijn and Poortman 2006). A problem that plagues all studies of the effects of the wife's income on dissolution risk is that the theoretical predictions are derived for the wife's *economic potential*, while analyses are in most cases based on her actual earnings. In most empirical studies, only crude measurements of earnings are available, while measurements of hourly wages are lacking. Another issue is that women who are dissatisfied with their current relationship may increase their labor supply because they anticipate a dissolution and are preparing to become single; thus, the higher divorce risk of employed wives and of wives with high incomes

could be due to anticipation of a dissolution. A recent test of this hypothesis from the Netherlands did not, however, provide any evidence to support it (Poortman 2005).

An American study examined time dependencies in the effect of wives' employment on divorce risk. A divorce-promoting effect of wife's employment was found, but only towards the end of the period, or after the mid-1980s (South 2001b). The gender-specific effects of income, labor force participation, and division of labor are likely to be closely related to gender ideology. For example, it is likely that wives who perform domestic work full-time in a context in which most women participate in the labor force are selected for having more traditional family values than other women, and this may be an important reason for the increasingly positive effect of wives' employment on divorce.

Brines and Joyner (1999) found that cohabiting couples in the United States in which the partners' employment and earnings were similar had a sharply reduced risk of disruption, while married couples had the lowest risk if they adopted a specialized division of labor. A Dutch study using administrative register data on both married and cohabiting couples found negative effects of total household income on separation, and positive effects of the woman's relative income (Kalmijn, Loeve and Manting 2007). However, in this case as well, the effects depended on the type of union. The findings suggested that equality led to a lower separation risk for cohabitants, while the traditional arrangement, in which the man is the main provider, led to a lower separation risk for married couples. The woman being the main provider increased the risk for both types of unions.

Work-life balance is closely related to the effects of income and labor force participation on divorce. The direction of causality is, however, again difficult to establish. An American study reported that working shift or rotation schedules increased the risk of divorce (Presser 2000). About 15% of the higher divorce risk for Dutch husbands working less than full-time could be attributed to the couple experiencing more financial pressures (Poortman 2005). In Norway, the introduction of a cash-for-care benefit, which transfers money to parents who do not use public subsidized childcare (and thereby increases the likelihood that one of the parents will stay at home), had the effect of reducing marital dissolution (Hardoy and Schone 2008).

What effects do economic shocks, like sudden unemployment or other sharp changes in earnings, have on marriage? There is some evidence from both Europe and the United States supporting the hypothesis that economic instability or hardship in the household increases the likelihood of marriage dissolution (Conger et al. 1990; Lewin 2005; Poortman 2005). For example, a husband's unemployment has been shown to increase dissolution rates in Norway, Finland, Germany, and the United States (Hansen 2005; Jalovaara 2001; Kraft 2001; Lewin 2005; Sander 1992). Fewer studies have examined the impact of a wife's unemployment, but results from Scandinavia have

shown a divorce-promoting effect (Hansen 2005; Jalovaara 2001; 2003). In line with economic search theory, sudden changes in the partner's economic contribution have been found to increase the risk of divorce (Böheim and Ermisch 2001; Weiss and Willis 1997).

7. Gender perspectives, values, and religiosity

Recently, more attention has been given to the partners' own views on gender roles, and to how socio-political differences across societies may modify the effects of intra-household arrangements on marital stability.

A study that used Dutch data found that the risk of divorce is lower for couples who hold on to the traditional, gender-specialized division of labour, but only if the wife's views are traditional. The effect of the division of labor is thus contingent on gender ideology and the concordance of the couple's cultural and economic dispositions; the traditional arrangement would not affect the risk of divorce, as such (Kalmijn, de Graaf and Poortmann 2004). In the United States, men with egalitarian gender role attitudes have been found to divorce less often than other men (Kaufman 2000), while employed women with a nontraditional (egalitarian) gender role ideology have been found to divorce more often (Greenstein 1995). Hohmann-Marriot (2006) found that that couples, and in particular cohabiting couples, who do not share beliefs about the division of household labour are more likely to end their union. Domestic violence is, of course, a cause of marital dissolution (Kingston-Riechers 2001).

A study comparing divorce behavior in the United States and in Germany showed that, in the German context, where the male breadwinner family has been more strongly promoted by the state, a wife's greater contribution to household earnings or a husband's greater involvement in housework increased the risk of divorce; while in the United States, the most stable relationships were found among couples with the highest degree of gender equity (Cooke 2006).

Another Dutch study reported that the magnitude of the effect of several factors on the risk of divorce depended on whether the wife, the husband, or both had initiated the divorce (Kalmijn and Poortman 2006). For example, the divorce-promoting effect of the wife being employed was found to be stronger when she reported initiating the dissolution process. Furthermore, having children was shown to decrease the likelihood of husband-initiated divorce more than wife- or couple-initiated divorce. A likely explanation is that fathers may have more to lose than mothers following a divorce in terms of influence over their children and opportunities to spend time with them.

Religious views on marriage and divorce may deter individuals from dissolving their unions directly, but there may also be more indirect pathways of influence

involving social and ideological factors. Indeed, the risk of divorce is lower for persons who are strongly religious (Lehrer 2004). Disaffiliation has been reported to increase the risk of divorce (Trovato 1993), whereas greater service attendance decreases the risk (Bracher et al. 1993; Brown, Orbuch and Bauermeister 2008). Religious homogamy seems to reduce divorce risk somewhat, even if one of the spouses is a convert to the partner's religion. There is likely to be some conflict potential if the two partners are committed to distinct religions with different teachings on central issues, or if members of the two denominations tend to hold social values that are incompatible (Kalmijn, de Graaf and Janssen 2005; Lehrer 2004; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Trovato 1993).

8. Migration and minority status

Moving to a new community is a stressful life event, and can sever ties to the social network the partners were embedded in while living in the previous location. In addition, one of the partners may benefit more from the move than the other. Several studies have found that mobility increases the risk of dissolution (Boyle et al. 2008; Frank and Wildsmith 2005; Muszynska and Kulu 2007).

Quite often, models of union dissolution rates include variables that capture effects of belonging to some minority-status group, which may be defined, for example, by immigration history or ethnic or linguistic boundaries. Of particular theoretical interest are couples who, by forming a union, have crossed the majority-minority boundary. Crossing such boundaries may impede the degree of mutual understanding and shared world-views between partners, and may also affect the level of social support the couple receives (Kalmijn 1998).

In the United States, race and ethnic origin are of major interest to demographers, as there are marked differences across racial lines in divorce rates and other demographic outcomes, with rates of dissolution being higher for African-Americans than for other groups (Cherlin 1998; Kposowa 1998; Phillips and Sweeney 2005; 2006; Sweeney and Phillips 2004). Interracial couples were reported to have higher risks of divorce than endogamous marriages, but once the ages and education levels of the partners were controlled for, the divorce risk among these couples was found to be similar to that of the more divorce-prone racial group (Zhang and Hook 2009).

This is a topic which, so far, has not attracted much attention from European researchers, but is bound to figure more prominently in the future, given the large and growing European immigrant populations. Recently, a significantly higher divorce risk for marriages between Dutch nationals and foreigners has been documented (Kalmijn, de Graaf and Janssen 2005).

Studies of the Swedish-speaking population in Finland, a minority language group, have found that couples that consist of two Swedish speakers had a significantly lower divorce rate than couples who are Finnish speakers. The rate for mixed couples was shown to be even slightly higher than for unilingual Finnish-speaking couples (Finnäs 1997).

9. Intergenerational transmission processes

A major finding in research on union dissolution is that divorce is more likely when the parents of either or both of the spouses have divorced. Several studies from Europe, as well as from North America, have documented and tried to explain this so-called *intergenerational transmission of divorce* (Amato 1996; Amato and DeBoer 2001; Diekmann and Schmidheiny 2006; Lyngstad and Engelhardt 2009; Traag, Dronkers, and Vallet 2000). Various explanations have been given for the intergenerational transmission of divorce. One that received considerable attention in early studies is *father absence*: i.e., the idea that children who experience parental divorce, and who therefore have little or no contact with their fathers, will not learn appropriate father and husband behaviour from role models; and that this absence will in turn generate problems in the children's own marriages. An example of a test of the father absence explanation involved natural experiment data from Germany. After individuals who lost their fathers during World War II were compared both with individuals whose parents divorced and individuals from intact families, the father absence hypothesis was not confirmed (Diekmann and Engelhardt 1999). Another explanation with many adherents is that poorer socioeconomic circumstances increase the divorce risk among both parents and their offspring. Neither this nor the father absence explanation fully account for the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Wolfinger 2005). One study using data on twins concluded that the intergenerational transmission of divorce is partly due to selection on genetic factors, but the results also supported the presence of causal transmission effects (D'Onofrio et al. 2007).

Much effort has gone into identifying the causal links between parents' divorces and those of their offspring. According to Wolfinger (2005), the explanation for intergenerational transmission of divorce that has so far received the most support in the research is that a couple's divorce leads to their children having lower levels of marital commitment (usually defined as the tendency to remain in a marriage despite marital troubles or appealing alternatives) which in turn translates into higher divorce risks for the children (Amato 1996; Amato and DeBoer 2001). Other less prominent explanations include the observations that children of divorce may have worse

relationship skills, and may have less exposure to same-sex role models (Amato and DeBoer 2001).

Variables such as the type of and age at entry into a first union partly mediate this relationship. For example, children with divorced parents more often choose to cohabit (Engelhardt, Trappe, and Dronkers 2002; Kiernan and Cherlin 1999). The tendency of children of divorce to choose each other as marital partners can exacerbate the risk of divorce (Wolfinger 2003). A study by Gähler, Hong, and Bernhardt (2009) reported that the transmission effect for both cohabitation and marriage dissolution in Sweden disappeared once commitment to the union, attitudes towards divorce, interpersonal behavior indicators, as well as life course and socioeconomic conditions, were controlled for.

There is currently a discussion underway about whether there is a time trend in the strength of the intergenerational transmission of divorce. This question is based on the idea that the consequences of divorce may weaken when divorce becomes a more common phenomenon. Conflicting results have so far been reported, with Wolfinger (1999) finding a decline in transmission strength, and Teachman (2002) reporting no such decline. Recently, Li and Wu (2008) have argued that the decline observed by Wolfinger (1999) was due to limitations of the data and methods used.

Another factor related to processes of intergenerational transmission that has been linked with divorce is the parents' higher socioeconomic status. Measured by either the parents' occupations or levels of education, this factor has been reported to increase the risk of marital dissolution risk in Scandinavia, net of spouses' own education levels (Hoem and Hoem 1992; Lyngstad 2006b), in the Netherlands (Klijzing 1992), and in the United States (Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991). It is not clear what processes are behind this effect, but suggestions include the possibility that the offspring of the highly educated have more liberal views on divorce.

10. Biological and health-related factors

Although most of the research on health and divorce is concerned with the possible health-related consequences of divorce for either the spouses themselves, or for their children, some studies have focused on the effect of health on the risk of divorce. High levels of psychological well-being are found to decrease divorce risk, particularly in the short run (Mastekaasa 1994). Excessive use of alcohol and the use of illegal drugs have been found to increase the risk of divorce (Collins, Ellickson, and Klein 2007; Kaestner 1997, Ostermann, Sloan, and Taylor 2005; Power and Estagha 1990). Having a physically frail or disabled child increases the risk of marital dissolution (Corman and Kaestner 1992; Mauldon 1992; Najman et al. 1993; Reichman, Corman, and Noonan

2004). Being diagnosed with cancer has not been found to affect the risk of divorce, with the exception of cervical and testicular cancers, which were shown to increase the risk (Syse and Kravdal 2007). Differences in health status between spouses have been found to increase divorce risk even for couples who otherwise find their relationship satisfying (Wilson and Waddoups 2002). Although speculation exists in the literature about the effects of the death of a child on marriage dissolution (Najman et al. 1993), reviews have concluded that there is no available study that offers a reliable evaluation of the divorce risk among bereaved parents (Oliver 1999; Schwab 1998). Cancer in a child has no marked influence on divorce (Syse, Loge and Lyngstad 2010).

A study using data on twins found that there is a genetic influence on divorce risk (McGue and Lykken 1992). One study of American men concluded that high levels of testosterone made men more likely to leave their spouse (Booth and Dabbs 1993), but this relies on an assumption that levels of testosterone are stable over time, which does not appear to be the case (Mazur and Michalek 1998).

11. Contextual factors

It has been suggested that various societal characteristics, in addition to couple characteristics, influence dissolution risks. The most common approach to investigating these characteristics is including an indicator of place of residence in models of dissolution rates. A consistent finding from such studies is that the divorce rate is higher for urbanites than for couples residing in rural areas, when other couple-level predictors are controlled for (Bracher et al. 1993; Lyngstad 2006a). The theoretical explanations for this difference include lower search costs for finding a new partner in urban areas, and higher levels of social integration in rural areas.

The availability of potential mates in the local marriage market has been argued to affect the likelihood of union dissolution. This theoretical argument, which is sometimes referred to as “the macro-structural opportunity theory of marital dissolution” (South, Trent, and Shen 2001), maintains that a greater likelihood of encountering a preferable new partner increases the propensity to dissolve an ongoing union (Udry 1981, 1983). However, it is difficult to define and measure these markets of partners. Administrative or geographical units are generally used to define the arena of partner search, but both small workplaces, and U.S. labor market areas comprising millions of persons, have been used (see, e.g., South and Lloyd 1995, Svarer 2007). A contribution that is frequently cited in this field is a study that found that divorce risk increases when the local sex ratio of available mates is unbalanced (South and Lloyd 1995). Despite relying on several assumptions about the definition of the “partner market,” this finding has been replicated with other U.S. data, in which the skewness of

occupational sex distributions was found to increase the risk of divorce (McKinnish 2004, South, Trent, and Shen 2001). In line with this finding, a recent Danish study reported that the risk of divorce is higher for couples among whom the wife worked in a male-dominated occupation (Svarer 2007).

It has been hypothesized that a high concentration of economically disadvantaged persons in the local community generates a milieu conducive to family instability (South 2001a). The support for this hypothesis is rather scant. A study using data from the United States reported that economic deprivation in the neighborhood did not affect the risk of divorce once couple-level resources were controlled for (South 2001a), and a register-based study found no effect on divorce rates of average income and the male unemployment rate in Norwegian municipalities, net of unobserved factors at the municipality level, as well as couple-level predictors (Lyngstad 2006a). However, a study from the Netherlands showed that the risk of union dissolution is lower when consumer confidence is high, net of individual-level predictors of dissolution (Fischer and Liefbroer 2006).

An analysis of Russian data that distinguished between the socialist regime and the post-socialist transitory system that followed found that there were no important differences in employment-related factors in either period, with the exception that, in the post-socialist period, employees of private companies divorced more frequently than others (Muszynska 2008).

12. National divorce legislation

Changes in divorce legislation are often preceded by *de facto* changes in norms and attitudes, but may also reinforce attitudinal change (Phillips 1991). Support for the former claim comes from Kneip and Bauer (2009), who, after examining the impact of unilateral divorce on the divorce rate in a number of Western European countries, found that increased legal rights to unilateral divorce had no long-run effects. In the United States, there was a major expansion of no-fault divorce laws in the 1970s, but this legal change does not seem to have had any lasting effect on the rate of divorce (Wolfers 2006). It might have short-term effects, as couples may adjust the timing of divorce in anticipation of the legal changes, or finally obtain a legal divorce after having lived separately for a longer period of time. A study of historical divorce data from the Netherlands also supports this view (van Poppel and De Beer 1993).

Another area of the law that might have an impact on union dissolution rates concerns the rules and laws pertaining to child support after a breakup, and the government's enforcement of such rules. In the United States and the United Kingdom, studies have shown that stronger enforcement of child support decreases the likelihood

of a breakup (Nixon 1997; Walker and Zhu 2006), and that, in the United States, this effect is at its strongest in situations where the mother is likely to be a welfare recipient after the split (Nixon 1997).

13. Conclusions

Our knowledge of the antecedents of divorce has increased over the last two decades. Higher dissolution rates and other changes in the family system call for a broader perspective that links the two partners' decision-making to their accumulated experiences from childhood, previous partnerships and childbearing, as well as education and employment careers.

From this review, it is evident that researchers have broadened their approach to union dissolution. Despite the fact that most of the studies reviewed were studies of *divorce*, there is a much stronger focus on cohabitation in the literature. The processes of choice of union type, both at the outset of the coresidential union and the stream of cohabitating couples into marriage (Steele, Kallis, and Joshi 2006), have received attention. Other outcomes of the mate selection process, such as what patterns of homogamy and endogamy mean for union dissolution, also figure prominently in the current literature.

Differences in institutions and culture across societies provide both challenges and opportunities for researchers, as a meta-analysis has shown that the variation between contexts in the effects of typical antecedents of divorce is large (Wagner and Weiss 2006). A trend over the past several decades, facilitated by survey programs such as the Family and Fertility Survey, has been to use comparative data to study such variations. The problems addressed include intergenerational transmission of dissolution risk (Härkönen and Dronkers 2008), changes in the effect of the wife's education (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006), the effect of child gender on divorce risk (Diekmann and Schmidheiny 2004), and the ways in which the prevalence of premarital cohabitation affect subsequent divorce risk (Liefbroer and Dourlejin 2006).

To further theoretical development in this field, researchers should make a more systematic attempt to identify causal mechanisms leading to gradients in divorce rates, and to disentangle these gradients from selection effects. In the wider social science literature, there is, increasingly, a focus on more complex methods for identifying causal effects (see, e.g., Winship and Morgan 1999). A typical statistical approach in studies of union dissolution is hazard regression models, whereby sets of independent variables, such as indicators of the presence of children in a union, are regressed on the rate of union dissolution. Conclusions from simple models with such variables give us important insights into demographic development, but, due to selection effects, less

insight, for instance, into the role of children as a barrier to divorce. Using simultaneous hazard models has been suggested as a remedy to this problem (Lillard 1993; Lillard and Waite 1993; Steele et al. 2005). An increasing complexity of statistical methods and a stronger focus on identification of causal effects are likely to become more common in the decades to come, as data availability and statistical expertise increase.

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