

Divorce

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Abstract

There is by now a large literature on divorce which seeks to understand the underlying reasons behind trends in divorce rates and establish the predictors of divorce as well as its consequences for adults and children. Early research examined divorce over time and across societies, and developed conceptual models to understand which factors affect partners' decisions to divorce. Recent cutting edge research has expanded on this literature and examined the multiple causes and consequences of divorce, heterogeneity in causes and effects, and the role of new demographic trends such as the increase in cohabitation. Future advances can build on (i) the use of new data, cutting edge methods, and cross-fertilization across disciplines, (ii) continued focus on emerging demographic realities, (iii) heterogeneity of divorces and their consequences, (iv) the mechanisms and processes that predict divorce and can help in understanding its effects, and (v) focus on cross-national differences and societal contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Divorce is commonly regarded among the major events to occur during one's life course and increases in divorce are among the main features of the recent decades of family change. Not surprisingly, divorce has attracted the attention of both the general public and of social scientists, and by now there exists a large literature on divorce trends and their causes, and on the predictors of divorce and its effects on adults and children.

I will discuss core parts of this literature and provide my views on interesting pathways for the future. Most of the literature concerns *divorce*, that is, the legally recognized dissolution of a marriage. Other forms of marital and partnership dissolution, such as separation, desertion, and annulment, have been given less attention, despite recent interests in the dissolution of cohabiting unions. Here, I will follow the existing literature and focus mainly on divorces, although touching upon other forms of union dissolution. Many of the predictors and outcomes of union dissolution are generally similar regardless of union type.

Next, I provide a brief overview to early and foundational research on divorce and recent research that has been particularly interesting and important (more comprehensive discussions include Amato, 2000, 2010; Härkönen, 2014). Then, I discuss topics that to my mind will be interesting and important for future research (see also Amato, 2010, pp. 661–662).

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Divorce, its trends, antecedents and consequences attracted the attention of social scientists from early on (e.g., Goode, 1956; Locke, 1951; Westermarck, 1891). Much of this early research was historical or comparative and included other than Western societies (e.g., Ackerman, 1963; Goode, 1963). Public and research interest in divorce rose together with divorce rates, and the latter were commonly explained with reference to the broader social changes occurring in conjunction with industrialization and modernization (Goode, 1963). Often these studies relied on aggregated data, but increasingly also on censuses and surveys (cf. Kitson & Raschke, 1981). Nevertheless, many of the patterns—such as the higher divorce risks among young couples and those with divorced parents—which have been consistently replicated were already established in early research (Kitson & Raschke, 1981; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Price-Bonham & Balswick, 1980). Other studies used qualitative techniques to analyze the experiences and processes surrounding divorce (Weiss, 1975).

From early on, there was an interest in the consequences of divorce on adults and children. Common concerns were then, as now, related to whether divorce as such could be seen as producing lower levels of well-being, how long these effects were likely to last, and which factors contribute to successful adaptation (e.g., Kitson & Raschke, 1981; Price-Bonham & Balswick, 1980). Answers to these questions varied. For example, conclusions concerning divorce and family structure effects on children varied from “harmful” to “weak and temporary” (e.g., Herzog & Sudia, 1973) and again to “potentially important” (Cherlin, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), partly owing to the access to and use of better data.

The work on divorce built on multiple theoretical approaches, from macro-sociological perspectives on the role of divorce in the family system, to microlevel views for understanding the family processes and mechanisms leading to divorce (cf. Kitson & Raschke, 1981). Among the latter, exchange theory (e.g., Levinger, 1965, 1976) provided an influential framework with its analysis of the decision to divorce as an evaluation of the costs and benefits of the existing marriage and the alternatives outside it. A similar, yet more formalized account, was put forward by Gary Becker and other economists (e.g., Becker, 1981; Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977) who became

particularly known for their analysis of the role of the gendered division of labor within households and its effects on family life (for a well-known critique, see Oppenheimer, 1997). This provided an economic framework for analyzing the links between the simultaneous increases in female human capital and economic activity and family instability, and many accounts saw the former as providing an explanation for the latter (cf. Cherlin, 1992; Ruggles, 1997).

CUTTING EDGE RESEARCH

Recent cutting edge research on divorce has partly stemmed from new research questions and partly from use of new data, techniques and viewpoints to answer old questions. One line of recent research built from the acknowledgment of new demographic behaviors and the complexity of personal relationships, living arrangements, and families. The increase in unmarried cohabitation prompted interest into their stability (e.g., Andersson, 2002; Wu & Musick, 2008) and their role in accounting for recent trends in divorce (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). There has also been a continuous interest in whether premarital cohabitation affects later marital stability. Premarital cohabitation is associated with a higher divorce risk, even though a general conclusion is that this results from selection of those with a higher divorce risk into cohabitation (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). However, other scholars have argued that the experience of premarital cohabitation may in itself lead to higher divorce risks (e.g., Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Another line of research has examined the stability of second and later marriages and similarly asked whether their higher instability is as a result of selection or causation (e.g., Poortman & Lyngstad, 2007). Finally, the wave of legal recognition and social acceptance of same-sex couples has increased research interest into their stability. Same-sex couples tend to be less stable, but otherwise the demographic correlates predicting their dissolution are similar to different-sex couples (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006; Lau, 2012).

Overall, many of the predictors of divorce are surprisingly stable across countries and historical periods (Amato & James, 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Teachman, 2002). A notable exception is female education. Women with college degrees have led the way to increasing marital stability in the United States (Martin, 2006). Internationally, the educational gradients of divorce have varied and in many countries, they have shifted from positive to negative ones (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006). The reasons are not fully understood, although many studies have begun from the hypothesis posed by William Goode (1962) which links changing barriers to divorce with class differences in marital dissolution.

There has also been continued interest in the role of female employment and economic resources in marital instability. It was long thought that they destabilize marriages, and this thought was formalized in the economic approach to the family, discussed above. Later research has brought more nuanced findings and shown how any effects are contingent on marital satisfaction, for instance, and how the causality might actually run from divorce risk to labor supply (cf. Amato, 2010; Özcan & Breen, 2012). A related question is how gender egalitarian practices and attitudes are related to divorce in modern societies, in which the former are increasingly accepted and expected (Cooke, 2006).

More psychologically oriented studies analyze the interpersonal and relationship characteristics that predict divorce. Here, the focus has predominantly been on conflict and problematic behaviors, in line with common notions of the processes leading to divorce (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Recent research has however begun to focus also on positive interactions (cf. Fincham *et al.*, 2007) and, importantly, identified that many divorces do not end particularly distressed marriages (e.g., Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

Research on the effects of divorce has benefited from the development and adoption of new econometric techniques to identify and estimate causal effects from nonexperimental data, which those used in divorce research without exception are. These studies include genetically informed designs (e.g., Amato & Cheadle, 2008), sibling difference methods (e.g., Björklund & Sundström, 2006; Ermisch, Francesconi, & Pevalin, 2004; Sigle-Rushton, Lyngstad, Andersen, & Kravdal, 2014), differences-in-differences analysis (e.g., Sanz-de-Galdeano & Vuri, 2007) and fixed-effects analysis (e.g., Amato & Anthony, 2014), simultaneous equations estimation (e.g., Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kravdal, 2009), and other advanced techniques. Particularly commendable are approaches that seek to study divorce both as an event and as a process (e.g., Kim, 2011). These studies have led to somewhat conflicting conclusions. Many continue to find that divorce has causal effects, even if they are weaker than the correlations between divorce and outcomes, but other studies have reported that these effects are completely due to confounding. An important question concerns whether these differences stem from differences in methods. Studies on divorce effects have been increasingly complemented by those looking into the effects of multiple family transitions (instead of just divorce) to analyze whether they have additive or different effects, thus recognizing the growing complexity of family life courses for many adults and children (Amato, 2010; Sweeney, 2010).

Another line of research into the effects of divorce looks into heterogeneity, as all adults and children do not experience divorce in the same way.

For some it provides a way out of a distressful family environment, whereas for others it can have long-term negative outcomes (e.g., Cherlin, 1999). Not surprisingly, the effects depend partly on the predivorce family environment and on postdivorce conditions and resources (cf. Amato, 2000, 2010; Amato & James, 2010).

Finally, the growing availability and use of cross-nationally comparative data have led to an increase in research on divorce across societies. These studies have shown similarities and differences in the predictors and effects of divorce and the contextual circumstances which do and do not shape them.

ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

What is left to explore after decades of divorce research? Many of the topics for future research will continue from recent analyses outlined above. For example, the complexity of living and family arrangements invites continuous focus on the stability of higher-order marriages, cohabitating couples, step-families, and same-sex couples and on the effects of multiple family transitions on the well-being of adults and children.

Overall, future research will continue to look into emerging demographic and social realities. After decades of increase, divorce rates have stabilized or maybe even decreased in a number of countries. Social science had difficulties in explaining the increases in divorce (cf. Cherlin, 1992) and was probably even less equipped to foresee and understand the recent plateauing and reversals in these trends (for the United States, see Goldstein, 1999; Heaton, 2002; however, Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). Yet in other countries, divorce rates began to increase more rapidly only rather recently. These diverging trends call for sustained attention to cross-national differences in divorce rates and trends and their underlying causes. Such research can revitalize efforts for understanding why divorce rates increased so dramatically (and later stabilized/decreased in some countries) and at different time-points in different countries. These developments need to be seen in the light of increases in nonmarital cohabitation. In this regard, an important question concerns the extent to which cohabiting couples can be seen as “marriage-like” unions, given the prevailing cross-national differences in the role of cohabitation in family formation (e.g., Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004).

Furthermore, there can be important group differences not only in divorce and its trends (the example of education was mentioned above). Particularly, increases in immigration to many countries calls for research that not only describes divorce rates across groups and looks into the family experiences and “assimilation” of minorities (e.g., Dribe & Lundh, 2012; Kalmijn, 2010; Qureshi, Charsley, & Shaw, 2012), but also analyzes whether and how they

affect attitudes and behavior among the majority population. In terms of children's postdivorce living conditions, future research will do well in recognizing and analyzing men's increased involvement in their children's lives and the increases in legal and practical shared or joint custody arrangements. Even though these questions have been raised already decades ago (cf. Kitson & Morgan, 1990), the commonality of these arrangements has recently increased with potentially important implications for children's and parents' postdivorce conditions and adjustment (e.g., Bjarnarson & Arnarsson, 2011).

The increasing adoption of cutting edge econometric techniques among divorce researchers means that questions of causality—both in terms of the effects of divorce predictors and of divorce itself—remain central. This development is welcome as these methods help in answering old and new questions about cause, effect, and their direction. These techniques also highlight and remind of various methodological issues. One has to do with the “control” group. For example, in studies on the effects of divorce a core question is whether one simply compares the divorced to those without the experience, or attempts more refined comparisons (e.g., the divorced vs those in happy or unhappy marriages, or divorce at an earlier or later stage in the life course). The counterfactual notion underlying the modern techniques reminds of these questions and emphasizes their importance for the interpretation of results.

A related question concerns how the event of interest—divorce—is specified and measured. Divorce has for a long time been seen both as an event and as a process which begins often long before the actual divorce is observed by the researcher, and can end well after (for a good discussion, see Amato, 2000). This, again, has methodological implications. One has to do with when the predictors and outcomes of divorce are measured. There has been a long interest in how long-lasting the effects are (cf. Cherlin, 1999). It has been less clear when (time-varying) predictors of divorce—such as employment—should be measured, and many studies resort to measurement at the time of divorce or immediately before the event. This can be problematic, especially if partners pre-emptively adapt to the looming divorce threat (e.g., Özcan & Breen, 2012). The question of divorce as an event or a process is central also for many widely adopted techniques to tease out causal effects of divorce, such as those relying on before-after measurements and sibling difference methods (cf. Amato, 2010; Sigle-Rushton *et al.*, 2014). As mentioned above, some studies have attempted to incorporate analysis of both the process and event (Kim, 2011). These developments are welcome, but do not solve the inherent problem that we typically only observe divorce as an event but not when the dissolution process began, which is already conceptually hard to identify. In any case, further work on these issues will

be highly relevant, and can benefit from analyzing the marital life course more fully than is commonly done (see below).

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Whether or not one wants to take the famous opening to Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* literally, it helps in reminding of the heterogeneity of relationships that dissolve. This has implications both for understanding the antecedents of divorce and its outcomes. Beginning from the former, above I mentioned research which shows that a high share of divorces involves partnerships that are not particularly unhappy or conflicting, even briefly before the break-up (e.g., Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Why such partnerships end is not well understood and future research into this question—but also, into why some unhappy and possibly violent couples do not divorce—can shed new light into the processes surrounding divorce. Future research could particularly take better use of longitudinal data which include repeated questions on marital satisfaction and quality. It is well known that average marital satisfaction declines over time (e.g., Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005). However, different couples may have different “thresholds” to divorce due to factors such as commitment, values, and common children or investments. A marital life course perspective into the development of marital satisfaction and quality over time and their influence on divorce risk in different couples can improve understanding of the pathways leading to divorce and also of the differences in divorce risks between groups.

In terms of heterogeneous effects of divorce (cf. Amato, 2000; Amato & Anthony, 2014), existing research has already documented how divorce effects depend partly on the characteristics and quality of the previous marriage, as mentioned above. Continued research into heterogeneous effects of divorce and into factors that promote successful post-divorce adaptation is needed, particularly in countries outside the United States where it has yet been relatively limited. The question of effect heterogeneity has also a methodological side to it, as many of the advanced econometric techniques identify causal effects only in a limited population, meaning that these effects cannot be generalized to the entire population (or even to all of those experiencing divorce). More generally, there has been increasing methodological interest in the heterogeneity of causal effects (e.g., Heckman & Vytlacil, 1999).

As discussed above, the common sociodemographic predictors of divorce are relatively well-known and future research will likely help in understanding whether they have causal effects on divorce or not. In many cases, the underlying mechanisms producing these effects remain less well understood and future research can contribute to these filling these gaps, with approaches including ones mentioned previously. One specific line

for continued research concerns who initiates the divorce process and whether different factors affect “men’s” and “women’s” divorce proneness. Numerous studies have shown that women are more likely to file for divorce or initiate the process leading in to it. This pattern appears to be more universal than acknowledged (Mignot, 2009). Why this is so would be another highly interesting topic for future research. Social science is generally much better equipped to answer questions regarding variation than stability, and ways forward regarding this question as well will be to analyze the conditions under which wives are more likely to initiate the divorce process. Existing research has focused on the characteristics of individual marriages (cf. Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Sayer, England, Allison, & Kangas, 2011), but future research could additionally look into cross-national and historical variation.

The growing focus on causal effects has led to interesting associations being dismissed if they are not found to represent causal relationships between the two main variables of interest. However, whether the predictor in question has a causal effect or not is just part of the story; whenever there is an association, something produced it. Dismissing spurious effects as uninteresting can imply turning a blind eye to many important questions. For example, whether education has a causal effect on divorce or not is a relevant question, but a negative answer does not mean that educational gradients in divorce are uninteresting; after all, educational levels do label people and position them in different parts of the social structure and knowing why these different groups divorce at different rates is relevant as such. Likewise, even if parental divorce has no causal effect on children’s well-being, knowing why children with divorced parents on average fare worse is not uninteresting nor policy irrelevant. Therefore, future research should not dismiss “selection” but rather embrace its potential for unpacking the different mechanisms which produce associations between divorce and other factors.

Finally, an interesting avenue for future research is to pay more attention to the effects of divorce rates at the level of societies on individual well-being, that is, whether living in a high (low) divorce (risk) society has effects independently of individual experiences of divorce. A higher (lower) perceived or actual risk of divorce alters expectations about the future and the power balance between partners (e.g., González & Özcan, 2013; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2006); additionally, if experience of divorce has negative effects on individual well-being, these may spill over to others in the network (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003).

Recent research on divorce has been increasingly multidisciplinary and without doubt many future insights will build on cross-fertilization and collaboration between disciplines such as sociology, economics, psychology, and the biological sciences. Longitudinal data will remain the most useful

sources for quantitative analysis on divorce. New insights are likely to come from different sources. On the one hand, improvements in survey questions on the processes (including psychological and subjective ones) leading to and surrounding divorce will be useful (although an increasing concern will be the decreases in response activity). On the other, large-scale census and register data will improve precision of estimates, enable follow-ups free from drop-out, and the possibilities for employing techniques for yielding causal estimates. The merging of biological and social scientific variables within data sets will also continue to provide interesting openings. Finally, cross-nationally comparative longitudinal data will help to analyze cross-national differences and the interactions between societal and individual variables. More generally, future research will benefit from continuing to broaden its focus from the United States and a selected number of European countries to other parts of the world. In this sense, divorce research can benefit by going back to its roots and early studies, which commonly included such comparisons.

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