

An Around-the-World Decline in Divorce for the Most Educated?

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Short abstract

In the United States, Europe, and East Asia, we find signs that divorce is declining among the most educated, with continued increases, or slower declines among those with less education. A pessimistic interpretation of this trend is that it will increase social and economic inequality of children's life chances. A more optimistic interpretation is that perhaps the most educated are the forerunners of a more general decline in divorce. Our analysis will enable us to be more certain of international trends and their potential consequences. In particular, we plan to look at dissolution risks of unions (both married and cohabiting) with children, in order to take account of changing union formation patterns and to focus on families with children.

Extended abstract

Overview

In the United States, Europe, and East Asia, there are signs that divorce is declining among the most educated. In the United States, a modest decline in divorce since the early 1980s turns out to be the result dramatic declines among the college educated and continued increase among the least educated. In Europe, the difference in divorce risks by education has widened considerably, with highly-educated women facing smaller divorce risks. The same phenomenon appears at work in East Asia, particularly in Korea, where the most dramatic increases in divorce have been among those with the least education.

In this paper, we investigate the trajectory of divorce trends by social status across North American, European, and East Asian populations. Our findings build on earlier work by Steven Martin (2006) in the United States and Juho Härkönen and Jaap Dronkers (2006) in Europe. We are interested in the following questions:

- (1) Is there are universal pattern of increasing inequality in divorce risks?
- (2) Is there a universal decline in divorce risks for the most educated?
- (3) Does the picture change if we include long-term cohabitation in the analysis?
- (4) Does the picture change if we take unions with children as the units of analysis?

Our current research aims to accurately describe what we believe is an important new phenomenon. Later research will look for explanations of what appears to have happened.

Large declines in divorce are of interested because of their consequences for couples and children and for people considering marriage, cohabitation, and child-bearing. There are many explanations for why divorce has increased including the increasing economic independence of women, the declining economic security of men, changes in social attitudes and legal restrictions, the self-reinforcing nature of divorce, and the increasing ease of remarriage given an enlarged pool of divorced people. However, there is not to our knowledge an accepted theory of why divorce rates might decline.

Data, Scope, and Methods

Our research is cross-national, using a variety of data sources and measures, depending on the country. For the United States, we plan to use the soon-to-be released 2006 panel of the National Survey of Family Growth. For Korea, we will use the divorce tabulations from registration data. For Japan, we are still investigating a good source. For Europe, we will use survey data from the Gender and Generations Program, which although not available for all countries, provides an important update to the Family and Fertility Surveys of the 1990s.

The primary method used in the research will be event history regressions, using education and other measures of socio-economic status to measure the divorce gradient, and its change over time, in each population. The event history approach also allows us to define the kind of union of interest, including cohabitation, or unions with children.

Preliminary Findings

Here we provide three tables -- for the United States, Korea, and Europe -- showing the increasing inequality in divorce. The U.S. results are taken from Martin (2006); the Korea results are estimated Hyunjoon Park; and the European results are from GGP surveys, as harmonized by Brienna Perelli-Harris. The Park and Perelli-Harris tabulations are preliminary and require further analysis for verification. We will update the U.S. with the upcoming release of the 2006 NSFG panel.

In the United States we see that overall slight decline in divorce masked continued increases in divorce risks among the less educated and large decreases among the more educated. In Korea, despite an enormous rise in divorce risks over recent decades, there has been little change for educated women and evidence, even, of recent declines among the most educated. In Europe, where our results are still preliminary, we see divorce risks grew faster among those with less education through the 1990s. In the most recent period, there appears to have been a slight decline in divorce risks for those with less education and an even larger decline for the most educated.

Table 1. Marital dissolution within ten years of first marriage, cohort estimates.

Marriage Cohort	Educational attainment			All
	Lowest-third	Middle-third	Highest-third	
1975-79	35.6	37.9	30.9	34.8
1980-84	34.7	35.8	25.1	31.9
1985-89	35.2	34.3	20.9	30.1
1999-94	39.9	35.8	18.1	31.2

Source: Martin (2006), Table 1

Table 2: Relative Risks of Divorce in Korea by Wife's Education

Marriage Cohort	< Tertiary Educ	Tertiary Educ
1970s	1.0	2.2
1980s	3.7	2.5
1990s+	5.4	2.0

Source: Own estimation from Korean marriage registration data.

Table 3: Relative Risks of Divorce in Europe*, pooled cross-national sample, by Wife's education

Marriage Cohort	< Tertiary Educ	Tertiary Educ
1970s	1.0	1.1
1980s	1.2	1.2
1990s	1.4	1.1
2000s#	1.0#	0.6#

*Source: Own estimation from GGS pooled sample from Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Russia, and UK.

#Estimates post-2000 should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes and limited durations of marital exposure.

Preliminary Conclusions

It appears to us as if there may have been an around-the-world increase of within-society inequality in divorce risks, with those with more resources (such as education) facing smaller and smaller risks of divorce while those with fewer resources face divorce chances that are flat or increasing. A pessimistic interpretation of this trend is that it will increase social and economic inequality of children's life chances. A more optimistic interpretation is that perhaps the most educated are the forerunners of a more general decline in divorce. Our analysis will enable us to be more certain of international trends and their potential consequences. In particular, we plan to look at dissolution risks of unions (both married and cohabiting) with children, in order to take account of changing union formation patterns and to focus on families with children.