

DIVORCE AMONG MACROSOCIAL UNITS: A REEXAMINATION

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ABSTRACT

This study revisits fairly well-established theoretical assumptions, in order to reexamine the variation in aggregate measures of divorce among the 50 American states. Four hypotheses (i.e. social integration, women's economic independence, socioeconomic status, and proportion of the population that is black) are derived as potential explanations. Regression analysis indicates that social integration is inversely related to divorce, whereas women's economic independence is positively related to divorce. Socioeconomic status is found to be negatively related to divorce, whereas proportion of the population that is black has no effect.

INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, the causation of divorce has been a topic likely to spark off heated debates among people from virtually all walks of life. Sociological interest in this subject is reflected in a multitudinous collection of studies designed to identify key causative factors (for example, Shelton 1987; Amato & Rogers 1997; Rogers & DeBoer 2001; Amato & Previti 2003; and Holley, Yabiku, & Benin 2006). In terms of methodological style, macrosocial studies provide a useful way to obtain "snapshots" of the way in which structural patterns fit together within society. In contrast, microsocial studies attribute causation in terms of individuals' opinions, ideas, and attitudes. In this macrosocial study of divorce, we demonstrate its relationship with four structural factors namely social integration, women's economic independence, socioeconomic status, and black population size.

From a scientific viewpoint, sociological findings must be considered tentative, since every new answer raises new questions. In fact, many scientific accomplishments become antiquated within a couple of decades. Therefore, the constant validation of well-established theoretical notions and the reexamination of old findings are processes that must go on ad infinitum, especially since society is in state of constant change (Weber 1958 138). Stated simply, the analysis of recent data might shed new light on old scientific problems. Hence, our main rationale for this study is to revisit fairly well-established perspectives using relatively recent data.

Social Integration and Divorce

The notion that high levels of social integration are associated with low levels of self-destructive behavior was first studied by Emile Durkheim (1897/1951). Since then, a

number of studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between social integration and divorce or marital disruption (Booth, Edwards, & Johnson 1991; Shelton 1987; Breault & Kposowa 1987; and Glenn & Shelton 1985). Social integration is defined as the ties that bind people, as well as various segments of society into one unified whole. In order to study this phenomenon, researchers have used different indicators. In the sociological literature, social integration has been operationalized as community size (Shelton 1987), residential mobility (Glenn & Shelton 1985), church membership, population change, and urbanity (Breault & Kposowa 1987), number of friends and voluntary associations (Booth et al 1991), household density (Regoeczi 2002), and in-migration and out-migration (South 1987).

Based on Durkheim's theory (1897/1951), high levels of social integration engender high levels of conformity to group norms and expectations. In contrast, high levels of non-conformity result from anomie which refers to the state of affairs in which social norms are weak, absent, or conflicting. Within collectivities, social integration reflects social stability and consensus, whereas divorce is a consequence of social instability and relative lack of consensus. We therefore should expect that divorce will vary inversely with social integration, net of other influences. In addition, social integration acts as a source of support for married couples. While it provides social approval to those who fulfill their marital obligations and keep their commitment, it dispenses social disapproval to those who are dissatisfied and wish to end their marriages. Actually, when attempts are made by policy makers to strengthen community commitment toward strong marriages, divorce rates decline (Birch, Weed, & Olsen 2004). When counties that adopted commu

nity marriage policies were compared to those that did not, divorce rates were discovered to have declined faster among the former than among the latter. Furthermore, when social integration is low, families are isolated from kinfolk's, neighbors, and friends. Such families are likely to face burdens, which include lack of emotional support and no help with child-care and household responsibilities (Glenn & Shelton 1985). Put simply, people need people. Hence, social isolation or low integration is likely to be associated with high incidence of divorce, and vice versa.

In this study, population density is used as a proxy for social integration. When people live in stable communities having reduced residential mobility, social integration increases; resulting in low divorce rates (Glenn & Shelton 1985). We further argue that dense communities provide individuals a greater opportunity to share resources, neighborhood ties, similar values and norms; and exchange of mutual assistance. In contrast, individuals who live in sparsely populated communities may be socially isolated with reduced opportunity for face-to-face social interaction, resulting in reduced social support during periods of stress and discouragement.

In spite of these theoretical assertions, studies on the effect of density on human social behavior is plagued with contradictory findings. Whereas some studies discover positive effects, others discover negative effects. These contradictory findings may be due to 1) the suspected curvilinear nature of the population density variable, and 2) that crowding effects may be either causal or the result of self-selection (Rogoczi 2002). Although these findings may hold true for microsocial data (Rogoczi 2002), analysis of macrosocial data might yield different results. Based on the above theoretical discussion, we expect population density to be inversely related to measures of divorce.

Women's Economic Independence and Divorce

Female labor force participation has been shown to be positively related to divorce (South 1985). More specifically, when a wife's economic independence (operationalized as wages or employment) increases, the incidence of divorce increases as well (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O'Rand 1998). The

explanation is that economic independence is likely to motivate women to end unhappy marriages, while being able to provide economic support for themselves and their children. Moreover, South (2001) has shown that over time, the effect of wives' economic independence on divorce has become increasingly positive. Also the longer marriages last, wives' employment exerts an even greater effect on divorce. The reasons for this trend are threefold. 1) institutional supports now exist to help unmarried working mothers. 2) Working women are no longer bound by traditional gender-role ideologies. And 3) there is now a declining trend in workplace sex-segregation. Lending further credence to this notion, an analysis of panel data carried out by Amato and Previti (2003), revealed positive associations between SES (education and income) and relationship-centered causal factors of divorce.

However, there is some ambiguity in research findings regarding the relationship between financial resources and divorce. In a study of married individuals, income is not significantly related to the risk of divorce. This may be due to the assumption that increased financial resources might favorably affect wives' marital happiness in general, thus improving troubled marriages in particular (Rogers & DeBoer 2001). These contradictory findings may be explained in terms of which facet of divorce is being studied, and also which methodology is being utilized.

In this study, we use percentage of women-owned firms as an indicator of women's economic independence. Since women who own their own businesses are likely to be economically independent, it may be a more practical way to test the economic opportunity hypothesis at the aggregate level. This hypothesis assumes that female labor force participation in and of itself does not weaken the foundation of marriage, but rather provides women the economic resources that they need to discontinue unsatisfactory marriages (Schoen, Astone, Rothert, Standish, & Kim 2002). Based on these observations, the percentage of women-owned firms should be positively related to the incidence of divorce.

In spite of our hypothesized direction of the relationship between women's earnings and divorce, the logic is rather complex. For instance, when married women's earnings lead to their economic independence, mari-

tal disruption is likely. At the same time however, married women's earnings also contribute to their families' economic status as well as financial security. Thus, wives' economic assets may be either positively or negatively related to marital stability, depending on which relationship is being tested. Hence, "wives' economic independence" and "wives' economic status" should be regarded as conceptually and methodologically distinct (see Heidemann et al 1998).

Socioeconomic Level and Divorce

In this study, educational level is used as an indicator of socioeconomic level. The notion persists that divorce rates are inversely related to educational level, when used as an indicator of socioeconomic level. In an attempt to account for the slight decline in America's divorce rate beginning in the early 1980's, Heaton (2002) identified a number of factors that contribute to marital stability. Among such factors was higher educational level. It stands to reason therefore that if higher educational level contributes to marital stability, lower educational level would engender marital instability leading consequently to divorce. Also, in their analysis of Current Population Survey Data, Raley and Bumpass (2003) found that sixty percent of the first marriages of high school dropouts ended in divorce, whereas only thirty-six percent among college graduates did. From a racial viewpoint, the incidence of divorce is relatively higher among black women (an economically disadvantaged group) and lower among white women (an economically privileged group) (Sweeney & Phillips 2004). In fact, Americans most likely to say that they have been divorced include those without a college degree (Carroll 2006). Focusing on the second decade of marriage and later, Hiedemann et al (1998) provide some explanations for this observation. They stem from the notions that college-educated women tend to have postponed marriage till later on in life, to have chosen their spouses from an educated and richer pool of eligibles, and that they have invested much in their marriages. Thus, it stands to reason that educated women may have too much to lose from a divorce. Based of these observations, we expect that higher educational attainment will be inversely related to the incidence of divorce.

Black Population Size and Divorce

Research has shown that black population concentration may not be related to divorce at the aggregate level (Breault & Kposowa 1987). However, from an ecological perspective, the concentration of blacks in certain locations has been found to be positively related to racial and economic inequality (Beggs, Villemez, & Arnold 1997). Several disadvantageous social and demographic factors related to age at marriage, education, premarital childbearing, and region of residence, may indeed sow the seeds of high divorce rates among blacks (Sweeney & Phillips 2004). Therefore all things considered, divorce rates are likely to be higher in locations that have high concentrations of blacks (South 1987). In addition, racial discrimination has a detrimental effect on the social and economic development of blacks. These social and economic setbacks may have adversely affected family stability. In this study however, race-specific measures of divorce are not used. Therefore, we cannot determine with certainty the effect that black population size has on the incidence of divorce. In spite of this limitation, we do expect that black population size will be positively related to the incidence of divorce at the aggregate level.

In short, four hypotheses are developed to explain the incidence of divorce at the aggregate level. They are the social integration, women's economic independence, socioeconomic status, and black population size hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 (Social Integration). The higher the level of social integration, the lower will be the incidence of divorce.

Hypothesis 2 (Women's Economic Independence). The higher the measures of women's economic independence, the higher will be the incidence of divorce.

Hypothesis 3 (Socioeconomic Status). The higher the measures of socioeconomic status, the lower will be the incidence of divorce.

Hypothesis 4 (Black Population Size). The larger the black population size, the higher will be the incidence of divorce.

METHOD

The sample comprises the 50 American States, data for which were obtained from published sources of the U. S. Census Bu

Table 1: Univariate Distribution of Dependent and Independent Variables Among U.S. States (N=50)

Variable	M	SD
Percentage Divorced	10.070	1.300
Persons Per Square Mile (Natural Log)	4.416	1.414
Percentage of Women-Owned Firms	25.270	1.782
Percentage of Persons (25+ yrs) With Bachelor Degrees of Higher	23.752	4.285
Percentage of the Black Population (Natural Log)	1.656	1.312

reau. Measures for all variables are for the year 2004. Percentage black population is not related to divorce at the aggregate level of analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

Our primary objective in this study was to depict a social landscape showing aggregate patterns of divorce and some of its correlates in the United States. Also, we attempted to reassess fairly well-established theoretical notions, hypotheses, and findings in light of relatively recent data. For science to advance, the constant reevaluation of old findings is a process that should go on ad infinitum (Weber 1958). However our conclusions are tentative at best, since the study contains a number of limitations.

Firstly, divorce is measured as the percentage of persons aged 15 years and over that are divorced. This measure is admittedly problematic, since it includes those people who have divorced multiple times. Also, although this measure is age-standardized, it might have an inflationary effect on the study's findings.

Secondly, population density may not be the best proxy for social integration. Nevertheless, social integration has been shown to increase when people live in stable communities having reduced residential mobility (Glen & Shelton 1985). Arguably, dense communities will likely provide people a greater chance to share resources, neighborhood ties, similar values and norms; and to exchange resources. In contrast, sparsely populated communities will likely engender social isolation, leading to weak community ties.

Thirdly, the data are neither race-specific nor sex-specific. Therefore, further research is needed in order to verify the extent to which the predictor variables influence divorce among racial groups, and husbands and wives (see Heckert, Nowak, & Snyder 1998; and Ono 1998). For example, our finding that the proportion of the population that is black has no effect on divorce may be misleading;

since the data are disaggregated by neither race nor sex. In light of a recent analysis of survey data investigating racial differences in patterns of marital disruption, marital disruption rates for white women decreased somewhat after the mid-1970s, whereas those for black women increased somewhat since the late 1980s (Sweeney & Phillips 2004).

In spite of the above limitations, a number of tentative conclusions may be cautiously drawn from this study.

Social integration conceptualized as population density is found to be inversely related to divorce. This points to the notion that people need people. Greater masses of people result in more restaurants, farmers' markets, shopping malls, parks, recreation clubs, churches, etc. All of these establishments support family life. Family members have more activities to share and enjoy, which actually strengthen marriages and families. On the other hand, social isolation and lack of social activities are inimical to the creation of strong and stable families.

Women's economic independence is shown to be positively related to divorce. Traditionally, women have depended on the financial resources of their husbands. Today, women are increasingly achieving financial independence. They are therefore capable of ending unsatisfactory marriages, rather than remaining in bad marriages in order to have a sense of place in society (Engelman 2004).

Finally, socioeconomic status is found to be inversely related to divorce. Poor people face a multitude of problems stemming from lack of financial resources. Obviously, the marital stress resulting from these conditions is so severe that divorce occurs on a widespread basis (Engelman 2004). On the other hand, the more privileged segments of society may be avoiding divorce since they have too much at stake. Also, many marital stresses are alleviated because money is available to provide solutions when

Table 2: Percentage Divorced Among U.S. States With Principal Correlates: Zero-Order Correlations (N=50)

	Percentage Divorced	Persons Per Square Mile	Percentage of Women-Owned Firms	Percentage of Persons (25+ yrs) With Bachelor Degrees or Higher	Percentage of the Black Population
Percentage Divorced	X				
Persons Per Square Mile	-.448**	X			
Percentage of Women-Owned Firms	.073		X		
Percentage of Persons (25+ yrs) With Bachelor Degrees or Higher	-.389**			X	
Percentage of the Black Population	.321*				X
	-.434**				
	0.001				
	0.254				
	-0.210				
	-0.073				

* Significant at the .05 level;

** Significant at the .01 level.

people are more likely to be living and working in places of high population densities.

Percentage of women-owned firms is positively correlated with percentage of persons (25+ years) with bachelor degrees or higher ($r = .434$). A possible explanation is that education is required to establish and operate many business firms. We could therefore tentatively suggest that educated women are more likely than uneducated ones to own their own firms.

However, we cannot be absolutely sure whether the above relationships are not spurious due to additivity effects. To eradicate this concern, we conducted a multiple regression analysis. This procedure involves regressing divorce on the four independent variables. The partial correlation between divorce and any one of the independent variables will indicate the predicted level of divorce, when all the other independent variables are held constant. In other words, we could actually predict the incidence of divorce from our independent variables. Moreover, the relative impact that the independent variables have on variation in the measures of divorce could be empirically assessed. Incidentally, since the fifty U. S. states used in our sample also constitute the population studied, tests of significance do not add any useful information to our results. Nevertheless, levels of significance are reported mainly because it is traditional to do so.

The results of the multiple regression analysis are portrayed on Table 3. They are as follows:

- 1) Persons per square mile is significantly and inversely related to the incidence of divorce, when the effects of the other independent variables are controlled (standardized regression coefficient = $-.455$). Hence hypothesis 1 (social integration) is supported.
- 2) Percentage of women-owned firms is significantly and positively related to divorce when other factors are controlled (standardized regression coefficient = $.391$). Therefore hypothesis 2 (women's economic independence) is supported.
- 3) Percentage of persons (25+ yrs.) with bachelor degrees or higher is significantly and negatively related to divorce (standardized regression coefficient = $-.400$). Hence, hypothesis 3 (socioeconomic status) is upheld.

Table 3: Incidence of Divorce Among U.S. States With Key Determinants (N=50)

Determinants	Unstandardized Regression Coefficients	Standardized Regression Coefficients
Persons Per Square Mile	-.419**	-.455**
Percentage of Women-Owned Firms	.285**	.391**
Percentage of Persons (25+ yrs) With Bachelor Degrees or Higher	-.121**	-.400**
Percentage of the Black Population	.166	.170

R = .623; R squared = .388

**p<.01

- 4) Percentage black population is not related to divorce at the aggregate level of analysis.

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