

Attitudes towards divorce while children are young: Explaining cross-national patterns

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ABSTRACT

In this study we examine differences across Europe in attitudes towards divorce if young children are involved. Data from the third wave of the European Social Survey (2006) are used. Our sample consists of 22 European countries and 37,975 individuals. A descriptive comparison shows that there are clear differences across countries in people's attitudes on divorce. To explain these differences, multilevel analyses are performed in which both individual level and societal level characteristics are included. About 12% of the variation in the attitudes towards divorce appears to occur on the national level. To explain this variation, we hypothesize that attitudes towards divorce if children are young are more favourable in countries where divorce is more common, the level of secularization is substantial, and the degree of poverty among single parent households is low. Our analyses support only the latter hypothesis. In addition we find that the effect of institutional support for single parents on divorce attitudes is stronger for women than for men, and for parents than for people without children.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed a strong research interest in attitudes on divorce. Both American and European studies have examined trends in divorce attitudes (Thornton, 1985; Van den Akker, Halman, & De Moor, 1994; Thornton & Young-DeMarco 2001; Liefbroer & Fokkema 2008). In addition, studies have illuminated individual, and to a lesser extent also cross-national determinants of divorce attitudes (e.g. Thornton, 1985, Trent & South 1992, Gelissen 2003; Martin & Parashar, 2006). Such research is relevant, not only because attitudes influence behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, 1980; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), but also because widespread negative attitudes may lead to stigmatization of divorcees. For instance, Kalmijn and Uunk (2007) showed that in European regions where attitudes on divorce are negative, men and women experience a stronger reduction in social contacts after divorce than in regions where attitudes on divorce are less negative.

Almost all existing studies focus on people's attitudes towards divorce in general. However, one could argue that attitudes towards divorce may strongly depend on the conditions under which a divorce occurs. One of the most relevant aspects in this regard is whether or not children are involved in the divorce process. For instance, Liefbroer and Billari (2009) showed that in 2000 only 9% of the Dutch population disapproved of divorce if no children were present, whereas 44% disapproved of divorce when the divorcees had young children. At least two important reasons for this finding could be given. First, the costs of a divorce for the partners involved are considered to be higher if they have children (Lillard & Waite, 1993), as a divorce will result in either increased care responsibilities (usually for women) or reduced contact with their children (usually for men). Second, the impact of a divorce on the children might be an important element in considerations about a divorce (Thornton, 1977). Research has shown that divorce and growing up in a single parent family have negative consequences for children (e.g. Cherlin et al., 1991).

The main aim of the current paper is to extend our knowledge about the cross-national determinants of differences in attitudes towards divorce in the presence of children. Whereas much research has focused on factors that influence individual differences in attitudes towards divorce, much less is known about the societal factors that could explain cross-national differences in divorce attitudes. The literature on European attitudes and values is largely descriptive, as noted by Halman (1995) and Kalmijn and Uunk (2007). Of the few studies that tried to explain cross-national value differences (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Gundelach, 1994; Halman, 1995; Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Baker, 2000), most were macro-level studies that related aggregated data on attitudes

to aggregate-level country characteristics. Gelissen (2003) constitutes an important exception, as he performed a thorough multi-level analysis of the cross-national determinants of attitudes towards divorce. However, as most studies, he focused on attitudes towards divorce in general rather than on attitudes towards divorce in the presence of children.

Against this backdrop, our research question is how differences between countries in attitudes towards divorce in the presence of children can be explained. In doing so, we will examine the influence of a more general factor that may influence people's attitudes towards a broad range of family issues, that is, the level of secularization, as well as more specific factors, namely the prevalence of divorce and the degree of poverty among single parent households. The latter relates to the assessment of the consequences of divorce in the presence of children. We examine these issues by conducting multi-level analyses, with 37,975 individuals nested in 22 European countries. This way we can account for individual characteristics that may partly explain cross-national differences in divorce attitudes and test interactions between individual and country characteristics. The data come from the third wave of the European Social Survey (2006–2007).

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Country level determinants

In understanding cross-national differences in attitudes towards divorce with children, two types of strategies could be used. First, one could take recourse to general theories that are used to explain temporal and spatial variation in family-related attitudes in modern societies. Examples of such theories are modernization (Inglehart, 1971, 1997, 1990) and secularization (Martin, 1979, 2005; Norris & Inglehart, 2004) theories in sociology and the Second Demographic Transition theory (Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986; Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1995) in demography.¹ Esping-Andersen's (1990, 1999) typology of welfare state regimes could be another example. A second strategy would be to focus on country level characteristics – e.g. structural or institutional characteristics – that are less abstract, but targeted specifically to the type of behavior that is the object of the attitude under study. In our view, both strategies have their strengths and weaknesses, and no a priori choice is needed. Instead, we focus on three country level characteristics that could be particularly relevant for understanding attitudes towards divorce in the presence of children.

¹ We are aware that these theories were developed to explain temporal change within societies. Thus, applying such theories to explain differences across societies, could be viewed as an example of 'reading history sideways' (Thornton, 2001). However, we do not view this as a problem as long as we have good arguments to expect developmental differences between countries with respect to these underlying processes.

One of them – secularization² – is an example of more general theorizing, whereas the two others – the prevalence of divorce and the poverty rate among single parents – are examples of more targeted theorizing.

Secularization

Secularization is a process through which religion loses its hold on the behaviours and attitudes within a society. It is a multifaceted process (Dobbelaere, 1981; Berger, 1990) that includes aspects like (i) a decline of the proportion of people within a society that adheres to a religious outlook, (ii) a decline in the proportion of people who are a member of a religious denomination, (iii) a decrease in the moral authority of religious denomination among society at large and among its adherents. The decrease of a religion's moral authority among its adherents is sometimes labelled 'internal secularization'; secularization may change the content of doctrine itself and the extent to which individual believers feel bound by these doctrines (Dobbelaere, 1981). The secularization process has consequences for attitudes towards divorce as Christian doctrine has long opposed divorce. Although the process of internal secularization may have relaxed the negative stance of the Church and of religious people towards divorce, it can be expected that their view on divorce is still rather negative, in particular when a divorce involves young children.

There are at least two ways in which religiosity can help to explain differences between countries in divorce attitudes. First, a compositional effect (Snijders & Bosker, 1999) may be operative, with countries with higher proportions of religious people having – on average – a more negative view on divorce in the presence of young children. Several studies have shown that religious beliefs and behaviour are associated with lower degrees of support for divorce (Thornton 1985, 1989; Larson & Goltz, 1989; Krishnan, 1994; Schovanac & Lee, 2001; Martin & Parashar, 2006). Whether such compositional differences relate to people's religious attachment as such or to their membership of specific denominations is not a priori clear. Second, in countries with a large proportion of religious people the Church may be more effective to propagate its teaching throughout society as a whole than in countries where a small minority of the people is religious. Hence, the level of secularization might influence the divorce attitudes of believers as well as of non-believers. Therefore, our first hypothesis reads:

² We focus on secularization rather than on modernization, because – although both processes are highly abstract – secularization is more concrete, both in terms of what exactly is changing and in terms of useful empirical indicators of the process.

H1) The higher the level of secularization in a society, the less disapproval of divorce involving young children.

In testing this hypothesis, attention will be paid to whether this effect 'only' operates as a compositional effect, or also operates as a macro-level effect as well.

Societal prevalence of divorce

People's attitudes towards divorce are socially constructed. One element that may be particularly relevant in that respect is exposure to the behaviour in question. First, approval of a certain type of behaviour might be more likely if a person has expressed that behaviour him or herself (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004). Trent and South (1992) and Gelissen (2003) found that persons who are divorced hold more liberal attitudes towards divorce. However, these cross-sectional studies do not preclude the possibility of selection of people with more approving attitudes towards divorce into divorce. Yet, Thornton's longitudinal study (1985), indicated a clear effect of divorce on attitudes toward divorce. In addition, exposure towards a certain type of behaviour, for instance among relatives, friends or colleagues, might also result in more liberal views towards that behaviour (Seltzer, 2004). In societies with high divorce rates, people are more likely to know people who are divorced, and therefore we assume they hold more liberal views towards it. Thus we expect:

H2) The higher the prevalence of divorce in a country, the less disapproval of divorce involving young children.

Poverty among single parent households

It is likely that, in forming an attitude towards a behaviour, people will take the potential consequences of that behaviour into account (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1977). With regard to the attitude towards divorce in the presence of young children, we would argue that a very important potential consequence that may help shape this attitude is the degree of poverty among single parents. Studies on the economic consequences of partnership dissolution have shown that women (and their dependent children) are often the losers; they experience a considerable loss in adjusted household income, while men experience only moderate income losses, or even improve their economic status (see Andreß, Borgloh, Bröckel, Giesselmann, & Hummelsheim 2006 for an overview of 24 studies from several European and North-American countries). As women are usually the ones taking care of the children after a divorce, this implies that divorce has negative consequences for children in terms of finances. In many countries, children in single parent households are much more likely to live in poverty than children in households with two parents (Eurostat, 2009a). However, the financial consequences of divorce are limited if women are

(largely) financially independent from their partner, either because of employment or because of welfare state support. In a context where children experience less negative consequences of divorce in terms of finances, a divorce involving young children might be more accepted. Hence we hypothesize:

H3) The lower the degree of poverty among single parent households, the less disapproval of divorce involving young children.

In addition, we expect that the strength of the effect of the degree of poverty among single parents on a person's attitudes towards divorce involving young children, depends on that person's gender and whether he or she has children. People who have children themselves might be more aware of the possible consequences of divorce for children, and therefore the poverty rate among single parents might affect their divorce attitudes more strongly than is the case for people without children. This might be true for mothers in particular, since they are most likely to end up with the care for the children after a divorce and might be more able to identify with single mothers. Therefore we formulate the following hypotheses:

H4a) The effect of the degree of poverty among single parent households on attitudes towards divorce involving young children is stronger for parents than for childless people.

H4b) The effect of the degree of poverty among single parent households on a attitudes towards divorce involving young children is stronger for women than for men.

Individual level determinants

As we noted in the introduction, existing research on general attitudes towards divorce largely focused on individual determinants. Although our main interest in the current study is on societal-level characteristics, individual determinants are also relevant, because of the possibility of compositional effects (Snijders & Bosker, 1999): differences in the composition of the populations of European countries with regard to individual characteristics might partly explain cross-national difference in attitudes. Individual effects of religion and divorce on divorce attitudes have been discussed above. In addition we discuss correlates of divorce attitudes with age, education, employment, gender, having children, parental divorce, and urbanisation.

Age might influence attitudes towards divorce because of cohort and life course effects. Studies by Thornton (1985), Trent and South (1992) and Gelissen (1993) indicated a negative effect of age on the acceptance of divorce. However, the effect of age on divorce attitudes might be non-linear; very young adults might hold more idealistic views of marriage than adults who gained more relationship experience, and therefore be less approving of divorce.

Education is also likely to be factor of influence. It might be expected that higher educated people are more approving of divorce, since higher educated people generally have more liberal social values than lower educated people (Hyman & Wright, 1979). Trent and South (1992) found a positive effect of educational level on approval of divorce when children are involved. Thornton (1985) and Krishnan (1994) studied only women and also found a positive effect of education on liberal views towards divorce. However, a trend study of divorce attitudes of young adult women in the United States between 1974 and 2002 gives evidence for an educational crossover: Women with 4-year college degrees, who previously had the most permissive attitudes towards divorce, have become more restrictive in their attitudes towards divorce than high school graduates and women with some college education, whereas women with no high school diplomas have increasingly permissive attitudes towards divorce (Martin & Parashar, 2006).

Evidence for the effect of employment status is even less clear (Trent & South, 1992). Trent and South reasoned that labor might expose individuals to more diverse attitudes and therefore employed individuals should have more liberal family values. They indeed found that employment people hold more liberal attitudes towards divorce. This was also found by Gelissen (2003). One might expect that employment influences especially women's attitudes towards divorce. As employed women are (more) economically independent than unemployed women, they might see less negative consequences of divorce and consequently hold more approving attitudes towards divorce. However, Thornton (1985) did not find an effect of employment (years of employment between marriage and interview) on his female respondents. A Canadian study of first time married women (Krishnan, 1994) showed that employed wives are more likely to see marriage as a permanent union than unemployed wives. As an explanation, the author suggests that employed wives experience less stress due to economic hardship and therefore value marriage more.

As it has been suggested that men benefit more from marriage than women do with regard to mental and physical health and overall well-being (Bernard, 1972; Hu & Goldman, 1990; Delphy & Leonard, 1992; Kapinus & Johnson 2002), women might be more approving of divorce. This was confirmed by Thornton (1985), Trent and South (1992) and Gelissen (2003).

People with children might be expected to hold more intolerant views of divorce involving children, because they are more aware of the negative consequences of divorce for them (and for parents). Yet, Krishnan (1994), Trent and South (1992) and Gelissen (2003) found no effect of having children or the number of children on divorce attitudes. Thornton (1985) does not find an effect of number of children either, but his sample only includes mothers.

Family structure during youth has also been found to impact on divorce attitudes. Those who experienced parental divorce tend to have more positive attitudes towards divorce (Amato, 1988; Amato & Booth, 1991; Jennings, Salts, & Smith Jr., 1992; Coleman & Ganong, 1994). The level of parental conflict was also found to predict attitudes of young adults: those from more conflictual families are less likely to support the permanence of the marital relationship (Kozuch & Cooney, 1995).

Finally, Trent and South (1992) found people living in urban areas to be more approving of divorce than people living in rural areas.

METHOD

Data

In this study we use data from the third wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), a repeated cross-sectional survey that was designed to measure social attitudes and values using face-to-face interviews. The ESS aimed to be representative of the residential populations aged 15 years and above, regardless of their nationality, legal status or citizenship. Strict guidelines were used to obtain a dataset of high methodological and theoretical quality. The third wave was held in 2006 and 2007 in 25 countries. Switzerland, Russia, and Ukraine had to be omitted for the current paper, because our indicator for the degree of poverty among for single parent households is not available for these countries. Response rates per country vary between 46.0% and 73.2%. The (unweighted) average is 63.5%. Our sample consists of 37,975 individuals nested in 22 countries.

Measures

Dependent variable

The dependent variable is degree of approval of divorce when young children are involved and is measured with the following item: ‘How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman/man gets divorced while she/he has children aged under 12?’, with the female version being randomly assigned to half of the respondents, and the male version being assigned to the other half. Answer categories range from 1 (strongly disapprove) to 5 (strongly approve).

Individual level variables

Since cross-national differences in attitudes on divorce rates might partly result from differences in the composition of populations with regard to individual characteristics that influence divorce attitudes, we included a set of control variables on the individual level. We included gender (0 =

male, 1 = female); age and age square, measured in years; educational level, ranging from 1 (primary education not completed) to 7 (second stage of tertiary education); employment status (0 = not employed, 1 = employed); and urbanisation, ranging from 1 (farm or home in the country side) to 5 (big city). Furthermore we included whether the respondent was ever divorced (0 = never divorced, 1 = ever divorced) and whether the respondent has ever had (a) child(ren), indicated by the variable 'children' (0 =childless, 1 = has ever had one or more children). We accounted for religion by using the degree of religious involvement and religious denomination. Religious involvement was measured as a factor score based on three items: self-evaluated level of religiosity (measured with the question "How religious are you?"), frequency of church attendance and frequency of prayer. A factor analysis showed one clear factor underlying these items. The higher the factor score, the higher a person's religious involvement was. Regarding religious denomination we distinguished the following categories: no denomination, Catholic, Protestant, Eastern-Orthodox, other Christian denomination, and non-Christian denomination. Finally we took into account whether the responded was assigned the male or the female version of the question on (dis)approval of divorce (i.e. whether they had to report their approval of a woman or a man divorcing while he/she has children under 12), which we call 'gender question' (0 = male version, 1 = female version). We could not include whether the respondent's parents are divorced, since this information is not provided in the data. An overview of the descriptive results on these variables is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 here

Country level variables

To test Hypothesis 1, we constructed an aggregated measure of religious involvement (see 'Individual variables' for measurement of individual religious involvement) based not only on the third wave, but also on the first (2002) and second (2004) of the ESS– as far as countries participated in these waves. First, we calculated the mean religious involvement per country per wave, and for each country we used the mean of the three waves. To test Hypothesis 2, we included the crude divorce rate of 2006 (source: Eurostat), which refers to the number of divorces in that year per 1000 of the population³. It ranges from .08 in Ireland to 3.2 in Latvia. To test

³ One could argue that the using the number of divorces per 1,000 married couples is a more meaningful divorce statistic for cross-national comparison, as the proportion of the population that is married varies across the countries, However, not all nations report these divorce rates, and the number of married couples is often either not

Hypothesis 3, we used the level of poverty among single parents in 2005, measured as the percentage of single parents households (with dependent children) with an equivalised disposable income below the poverty threshold, which is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income (source: Eurostat, 2009a). This percentage ranges from 18% in Sweden to 45% in Ireland. An overview of the country level characteristics is presented in table 2.

Table 2 here.

Method of analysis

Multi-level analyses were conducted in which both individual-level characteristics and country-level characteristics are included. In the first step, an empty variance-partitioning model (intercept only) was estimated to examine how much of the total variation in attitudes towards divorce can be attributed to the national level. In the second step, individual-level characteristics were included into the model to examine to what extent these individual-level variables influence attitudes and to what extent cross-national differences can be attributed to cross-national differences in the composition of national populations. In the third step, country level variables were added to test Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3. Finally, we included cross-level interactions between the poverty rate of single parents and whether one has ever had children respectively gender to test Hypotheses 4a and 4b.

Analyses were conducted with the xtreg command in Stata10⁴. The maximum likelihood option was used because the data are unbalanced, that is, the number of respondents differs per country.

FINDINGS

Cross-national differences in divorce attitudes

available in a timely fashion or not available at all. Because of these problems, most research on cross-national variations in divorce rates has used the crude divorce rate. (Greenstein & Davis, 2006).

⁴ One might argue that ordinal logit models are more appropriate because the dependent variable is measured on a 5-point scale that cannot be considered to be an interval scale. We also conducted ordinal logit analyses, resulting in outcomes similar to those of the ‘normal regression models’. The cut-off points indicated that the effect of the independent variables on moving from answer category 1 to 2, from 2 to 3 et cetera, were about equal, therefore we decided to present the ‘normal regression models’.

Clear differences across Europe in the attitudes towards divorce involving young children can be observed. This is illustrated in Table 2 and Table 3. In Table 2 the mean country score on approval of divorce is presented (1-5), ranging from 2.37 in Bulgaria and Romania to 3.87 in Denmark. In Table 3 the percentage of respondents in a country is presented that disapproves or strongly disapproves of divorce if there are children aged under 12. This percentage ranges from 56% in Bulgaria to 13.5% in Denmark. More generally, the tables show that disapproval of divorce if children are young is highest in Eastern-Europe and lowest in North-Western Europe (except for Ireland). The Southern and Continental Western European countries are in the middle. Yet, the level of disapproval does not strictly follow geographical lines.

Table 3 here

Explanatory findings

In Table 4 random intercept models are presented. Model 1, the empty variance partitioning model (intercept only), shows that the individual differences in attitudes between people within countries are much larger than differences across countries. Still, ρ indicates that 12.2% of the total variation can be attributed to the country level.

In Model 2 individual-level variables were added. The effects are largely in line with expectations. The effects of age and age square indicate that the effect of age is non-linear: both relatively young and relatively old people are less approving of divorce involving children than middle aged people. The effect of age square is very small though. The positive effects of gender, educational level, employment status, urbanisation, and ever divorced indicate that women, the higher educated, the employed, people living in urban areas and people who have been divorced are most approving of divorce involving children. The effect of the interaction between gender and employment status indicates that the positive effect of being employed on approval of divorce is about twice as strong for women than for men. The negative effect of children indicates that people with children are less approving of divorce involving children than childless people. Religious involvement has a negative effect, indicating that the higher people's religious involvement is, the more they disapprove of divorce when children are present. Furthermore, Catholics, Protestants and Eastern-Orthodox people do not seem to hold different attitudes towards divorce than people with no religious denomination, while people with another Christian denomination or a Non-Christian denomination hold more traditional attitudes. Perhaps the finding that Catholics, Protestants and Eastern-Orthodox do not differ from respondents with no religious denomination seems surprising. However, this is because we control for religious involvement. If

we drop the latter variable from the model, people of all denominations would hold more traditional attitudes of divorce than people with no denomination. Finally, the effect of ‘gender question’ implies that (male and female) respondents report more positive attitudes towards divorce if it concerns a woman (i.e. if they were assigned the ‘female version’ of the question) than if it concerns a man.

The reduction in variance between Model 1 and 2 indicates that by including this set of individual control variables, 9.9% of the variation at the country level is explained. Hence the difference in composition of the national populations with regard to the individual variables, does not explain a very large part of the differences in divorce attitudes between the countries.

In Model 3 we added country level variables, to test Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3. The crude divorce rate and mean religious involvement have no statistically significant effect.⁵ They do not have an effect either when they are included in the model without the other country level variables (results not presented). Hence, we do not find support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Poverty among single parents has a negative effect, indicating that the higher the percentage of single parents with an income below the poverty threshold in a country, the less approval of divorce involving children. Hence, Hypothesis 3 is supported. Adding these country level variables reduces the variation at the country level by about 18.6%, compared to Model 2. There is no significant increase in model fit between Model 2 and 3, but the fit of a model with the poverty level among single parents as the only country level variable (not presented), is significantly better than the fit of Model 2 ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.89$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .05$).

In Model 4 the interaction effect between having children and the poverty rate of single parents was included⁶. The effect indicates that the negative effect of poverty among single parents on approval of divorce involving children is stronger for parents than for people without children. In Model 5 the interaction effect between gender and the poverty rate of single parents was added. This effect indicates that the negative effect of poverty among single parents on approval of divorce involving children is stronger for women than for men. The interaction effect of children and the poverty rate of single parents is now only statistically significant at the .10 level ($p = .066$). Adding these interaction terms leads to significant increases in model fit (Model 4 versus Model 3: $\Delta\chi^2 = 4.64$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .05$; Model 5 versus Model 4: $\Delta\chi^2 = 10.12$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .001$) These findings support Hypotheses 4a and 4b, and we can conclude that a country’s level of poverty

⁵ It can be argued that one should not include an individual-level effect of ‘being divorced’ in our models, as this variable is potentially endogenous. We also estimated our models without this individual-level variable. The results were almost identical to the ones presented in Table 4.

⁶ A random-slope model (not presented) showed that gender as well as ‘parent’ have significant random slopes.

among single parents particularly affects mothers' attitudes towards divorce involving young children.

Table 4 here

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed at increasing our insight into cross-national differences within Europe with regard to attitudes towards divorce if young children are present. We did so by examining the effects of three societal-level characteristics: the level of secularization, the divorce rate and the degree of poverty among single parent households. In addition, we took into account compositional effects by including individual-level variables.

We found that education, employment, urbanisation, religious involvement, being female and being divorced are positively related with the approval of divorce if young children are present. Generally speaking, these effects are in line with earlier studies. In addition, we found that the effect of employment is stronger for women than for men. Age generally has a negative effect on approval of divorce, as was found before, but very young adults approve less of divorce than adults that are somewhat older. In contrast with other studies that found no effect of children (Trent & South, 1992; Krishnan, 1994; Gelissen 2003) we found a negative effect of having children on the approval of divorce. An explanation might be that in our study, respondents were asked about approval of divorce in the presence of children under age 12, whereas Krishnan (1994) and Gelissen (2003) studied divorce attitudes in general. The study by Trent and South (1992) did include an item on divorce if children are present, but the effect of the number of children was examined, instead of the effect of having children or not (dichotomous), as we did. The different compositions of the national populations with regard to these individual characteristics account for about 10% of the cross-national variation in divorce attitudes.

Country-level variables account for about 19% of the cross-national variation in divorce attitudes that is left after compositional effects have been taken into account. However, not all our hypotheses about country-level effects were confirmed. Our hypothesis that higher divorce rates lead to more tolerance towards divorce in the presence of children was not confirmed. This is in accordance with the results of Gelissen (2003). The general idea that the more one is exposed to a type of new behaviour, the more tolerant one's attitudes towards this type of behaviour become, may not be applicable if the behaviour is evaluated as largely negative. Perhaps some people

become more tolerant towards divorce by experiencing divorce in one's network, especially if they see its positive aspects, whereas other people become less tolerant, especially if they see the negative aspects. Another, more methodological, reason for the lack of effect of divorce rates is that the crude divorce rate does not tell us how many divorces in the country involve young children. Unfortunately, this latter type of information is not available in a cross-national comparative fashion.

We did not find support either for the hypothesis stating that the more secularized a society is, the more positive people's attitudes toward divorce involving children are. Apparently, the proportion of religiously involved people in the country does not increase the general level of disapproval of divorce with children. One's personal religious involvement does influence attitudes though. Hence the only effect of secularization on the national aggregates of divorce attitudes is a compositional effect: secularization implies that less people are religiously involved, and the lower people's religious involvement, the more liberal their attitudes towards divorce. Interestingly, once the level of personal religious involvement is taken into account, belonging to one of the three largest denominations in Europe (the Catholic, Protestant or Eastern-Orthodox church), does not lead to more traditional divorce attitudes than not belonging to any denomination, suggesting that general level of religiosity is a more important predictor of divorce attitudes than the specific denomination to which these religious people belong.

Our study supports the hypothesis that the degree of poverty among single parents negatively affects the approval of divorce. Hence, people in countries with higher poverty rates among single parent households are less approving of divorce. This seems to indicate that when forming attitudes towards divorce, people take into account the financial consequences for mothers and children. However, we cannot be completely sure of the causal direction of the association. Perhaps in countries where divorce (involving children) is more accepted by the population, policymakers respond by financial support for single parents or stimulation of their labour participation.

In addition, our findings suggest that the effect of the poverty rate among single parents on attitudes towards divorce involving children are stronger for people with children than for people without children, and stronger for women than for men. These findings are in line with our hypotheses. The reason for this might be that people with children, and especially mothers, can more easily identify with single parents, and therefore take into account their situation when forming attitudes on divorce involving children.

Our study is innovative for several reasons. First, divorce attitudes are studied taking into account individual and country-level characteristics by using a multilevel design. This has, to our

best knowledge, so far only been done in one study (Gelissen 2003). Second, whereas the study by Gelissen and most other studies of divorce attitudes examined attitudes towards divorce in general, we studied the approval of divorce if children under age 12 are present. This specific circumstance might be important for people's attitudes, as the presence of children increases the impact of a divorce. Third, in our models we included a country characteristic that has a very specific relevance for attitudes of divorce involving children: the degree of poverty among single parent households. In addition, we included cross-level interactions between this variable and the gender and parental status of the respondent.

A drawback of a multi-level study including 22 countries, is that only few variables at the country-level can be included at the same time. This makes it difficult to unravel the effects of the country-characteristics in our study of from other country-characteristics to which they might be related, such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, besides the level of secularization, we chose to include two country characteristics that seemed to be theoretically relevant specifically to divorce attitudes (involving young children). The interpretation of effects of the GDP would be hard, since GDP is highly correlated with many other characteristics of a country.

This limitation of the number of country level variables that can be included in the analyses does not only show the need for cross-national comparative datasets including many countries, but also the need for comparable indicators of country characteristics. The lack of comparable data on the degree of poverty among single parent households forced us to remove three countries from the ESS dataset.

Finally, we would like to note that in many European countries, having children in cohabitational relationships has become more and more common. In the European Union, one third of all children are born to unmarried parents (Eurostat, 2008). In some countries, this percentage is over 50% (Eurostat, 2009b). Although many cohabiting couples get married after they have had children, some see cohabitation as a substitute for marriage (Kiernan, 2001). Therefore, it would be interesting to study attitudes towards dissolution of cohabitation unions if young children are present, and compare these with attitudes towards marital dissolution involving children. At the moment, no such cross-national data are available.

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Table 1. Overview of individual characteristics (N = 39,975)

Variable	<i>M</i> / %	<i>SD</i>
Age ^a	47.30	18.51
Gender (% female)	54.07	
Educational level ^b	2.94	1.46
Employed (% yes)	53.98	
Urbanisation ^c	3.08	1.22
Ever divorced (% yes)	12.74	
Children (% yes)	68.98	
Religious involvement	-.01	1.00
Religious Denomination (%)		
No denomination	38.48	
Catholic	32.11	
Protestant	15.47	
Eastern	9.71	
Other Christian	2.20	
Non-Christian	2.03	
Gender question (% female version)	50.12	

^aIn years. ^bScale: 1-7. ^c0 = not employed, 1 = employed. ^dFactor scores.

Table 2. Overview of country characteristics (N = 39,975)

Country	<i>n</i>	Approval of divorce ^a <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Mean Religious Involvement ^b	Crude divorce rate	Poverty among single parents (%)
Austria	2,152	2.77 (1.00)	.14	2.5	27
Belgium	1,786	3.14 (1.12)	-.22	2.8	33
Bulgaria	1,170	2.37 (1.20)	-.19	1.9	25
Cyprus	937	3.00 (0.96)	.81	2.3	35
Germany	2,735	2.72 (0.76)	-.21	2.3	25
Denmark	1,452	3.87 (1.04)	-.35	2.6	21
Estonia	1,434	2.41 (0.75)	-.50	2.8	40
Finland	1,881	3.23 (1.08)	-.00	2.5	20
France	1,963	2.85 (1.12)	-.43	2.2	26
Hungary	1,362	2.74 (0.85)	-.21	2.5	27
Ireland	1,456	2.68 (0.84)	.74	0.8	45
Latvia	1,667	2.72 (0.92)	-.25	3.2	31
The Netherlands	1,836	3.24 (1.03)	-.11	1.9	26
Norway	1,735	3.46 (1.19)	-.36	2.3	19
Poland	1,632	2.61 (1.01)	.95	1.9	40
Portugal	2,108	2.97 (0.91)	.41	2.3	31
Romania	1,949	2.37 (0.95)	.82	1.5	27
Slovak Republic	1,565	2.90 (1.02)	.37	1.2	32
Slovenia	1,386	2.45 (0.90)	-.01	2.4	22
Spain	1,835	2.94 (1.04)	-.06	1.7	37
Sweden	1,871	3.22 (0.93)	-.50	2.2	18
United Kingdom	2,339	2.83 (0.77)	-.25	2.6	37

^aScale: 1-5. ^bFactor scores.

Table 3. Percentage of respondents (strongly) disapproving of divorce when young children are involved, by country

Country	% (strongly) disapproving of divorce when children <12
Bulgaria	56.0
Romania	53.7
Estonia	52.2
Poland	51.0
Slovakia	50.0
Slovenia	40.0
Ireland	38.4
France	36.2
Latvia	35.8
Spain	35.4
Hungary	33.0
Austria	32.7
Germany	32.2
Belgium	29.1
Norway	27.7
United Kingdom	27.7
Finland	27.2
Cyprus	26.6
Portugal	26.3
The Netherlands	25.2
Sweden	17.9
Denmark	13.5

Table 4. Individual and country level effects on approval of divorce when children <12 (N(individuals) = 39,975 N(countries) = 22)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	2.886 ***	.077	2.266 ***	.082	2.640 ***	.457	2.577 ***	.458	2.577 ***	.459
Individual level variables										
Age ^a			.016 ***	.002	.016 ***	.002	.016 ***	.002	.016 ***	.002
Age square ^a			-.000 ***	.000	-.000 ***	.000	-.000 ***	.000	-.000 ***	.000
Gender ^b			.169 ***	.014	.169 ***	.014	.169 ***	.014	.293 ***	.041
Educational level ^c			.062 ***	.004	.062 ***	.004	.062 ***	.004	.062 ***	.004
Employment status ^d			.060 ***	.016	.060 ***	.016	.060 ***	.016	.060 ***	.016
Gender * employment status			.066 **	.019	.066 **	.019	.065 **	.019	.064 **	.019
Urbanisation ^e			.019 ***	.004	.019 ***	.004	.020 ***	.004	.020 ***	.004
Ever divorced ^f			.224 ***	.015	.224 ***	.015	.223 ***	.015	.223 ***	.015
Children ^f			-.057 ***	.013	-.057 ***	.013	.032	.043	.020	.044
Religious involvement ^g			-.177 ***	.006	-.177 ***	.006	-.177 ***	.006	-.177 ***	.006
Religious denomination										
Reference cat. = No denom.										
Catholic			-.007	.016	-.006	.016	-.006	.016	-.006	.016
Protestant			-.016	.017	-.016	.017	-.017	.017	-.018	.017
Eastern Orthodox			.044	.029	.042	.029	.042	.029	.043	.029
Other Christian			-.161 ***	.034	-.162 ***	.034	-.161 ***	.034	-.160 ***	.034
Non-Christian			-.319 ***	.035	-.320 ***	.035	-.320 ***	.035	-.320 ***	.035
Gender question ^h			.199 ***	.009	.199 ***	.009	.199 ***	.009	.199 ***	.009
Country level variables										
Mean religious involvement			.140	.198	.140	.198	.140	.198	.140	.198
Crude divorce rate			.105	.150	.106	.150	.106	.150	.106	.151
Poverty rate single parents			-.021 *	.010	-.019 †	.010	-.019 †	.010	-.018	.010
Cross-level interactions										
Children * poverty rate single parents										
Gender * poverty rate single parents										
Variance country level (σ_{μ}^2)			.131 ***	.118 ***	.096 ***	.096 ***	.096 ***	.096 ***	.096 ***	.096 ***
Variance individual level (σ_{ϵ}^2)			.947 ***	.829 ***	.829 ***	.829 ***	.829 ***	.829 ***	.828 ***	.828 ***
ρ			.122 ***	.124 ***	.104 ***	.104 ***	.104 ***	.104 ***	.104 ***	.104 ***
Log likelihood			-53,182.3	-50,372.9	-50,370.6	-50,370.6	-50,368.3	-50,368.3	-50,363.3	-50,363.3

Note: $\rho = \sigma_{\mu}^2 / (\sigma_{\mu}^2 + \sigma_{\epsilon}^2)$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

^aIn years. ^b0 = male, 1 = female. ^cScale: 1-7. ^d0 = not employed, 1 = employed. ^eScale: 1-5. ^f0 = no, 1 = yes. ^gFactor scores.